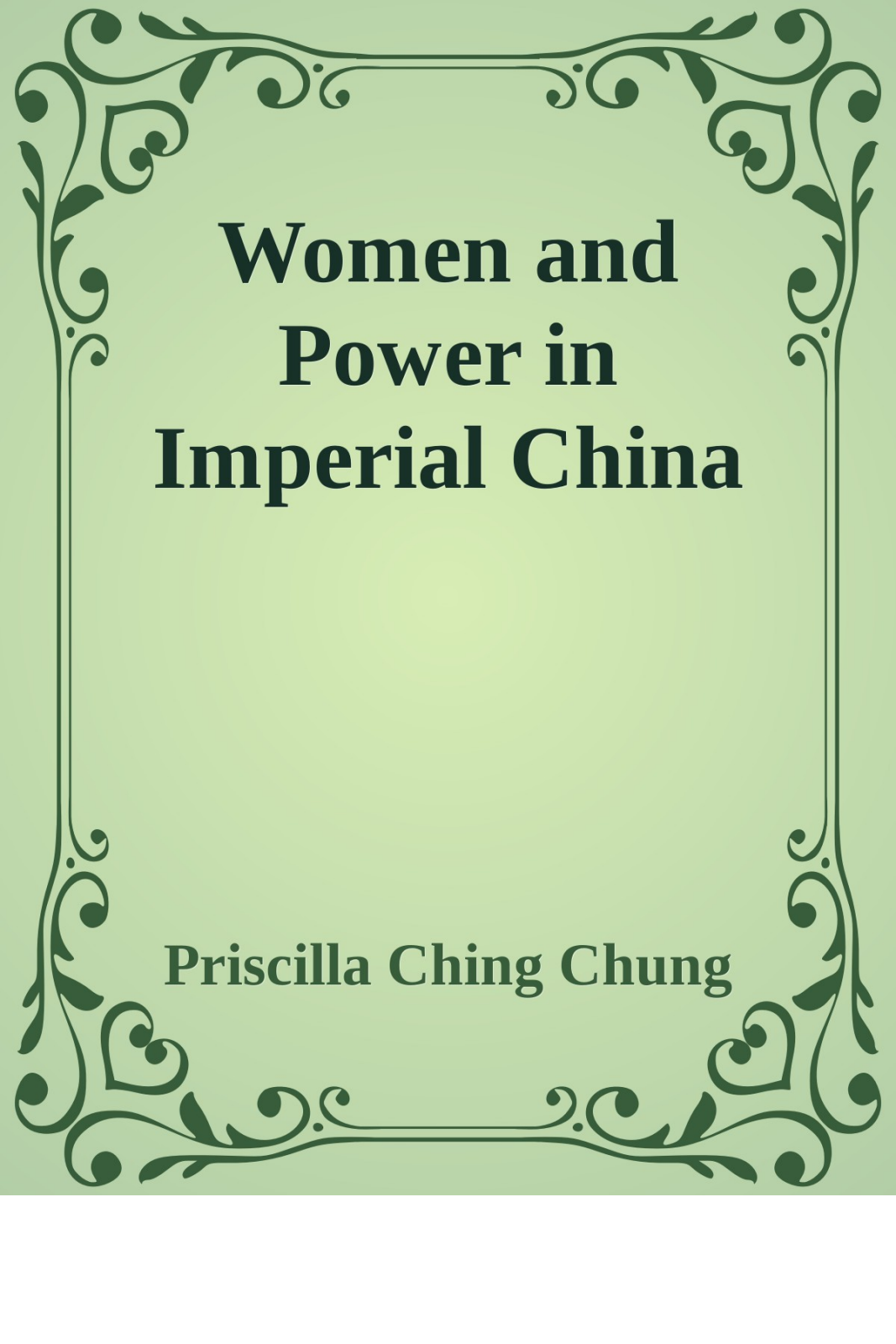


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark green color, framing the central text.

Women and Power in Imperial China

Priscilla Ching Chung

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*Women and Power
in Imperial China*

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Priscilla Ching Chung

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Reader's Guide to Using This Book

Guide for the General Reader

This book focuses on the status and roles of women in China, especially those who had a significant influence on governing the empire. In providing the background for its main theme, the book inevitably summarizes the principal events and social development of China throughout the imperial period. Thus a reading of the book's narrative from beginning to end will serve as an introduction to the history of China, supplemented by an in-depth look at the often neglected role of the women in this generally paternalistic society. It is not so much a look at Chinese history through the window of women's issues as it is a view of Chinese history with that window open. The section in the Introduction on the organization of the book explains how the author has approached this task.

The general reader may be somewhat intimidated by the large number of notes and references. These are intended to provide further information and source material for academically oriented readers, and perhaps to assure the general reader that the narrative is well founded. Nevertheless, the book can be read without reliance on the notes. The reader who wants a little more background can skim through the notes which are grouped by chapter at the back of the book. The notes that present supplementary information are easily distinguished from those that are just citations of sources. The number of each note is a link back to the point of the text where the reference to the note is found, so it is easy to find the context for the information in the note.

A few notes provide source information for several maps, and links to the maps are incorporated in the notes. These links also appear in the main text so that a map can be viewed without accessing the note. A link in the caption of the map takes the reader back to the text where the map was cited.

As in any history, the names of both the principal personages

and minor players are integral to the narrative. In this book, the Chinese names are displayed in the Pinyin system of Romanization. Having some notion of the sound of a name can help the reader remember it when it reappears in the text. Those unfamiliar with Pinyin should note that there are excellent resources on the Internet that provide assistance with the pronunciation, such as the [Mandarin Chinese Pinyin Chart with Audio](http://chinese.yabla.com) at chinese.yabla.com.

Guide for Teachers and Students

This is an introductory book that does not assume the reader is familiar with Chinese history. It therefore can be used as a text book at the secondary school level, or as a companion text or elective reading for a beginning Chinese history course, or a class in a women's studies program at a university. The book is unique in that it covers gender and ethnicity in the context of Chinese history. There are academic works based on primary research on these topics but they are written mostly for scholars in the field and are difficult for students to follow. The distinguishing characteristics of *Women and Power in Imperial China* include:

- It is an introductory text on Chinese history focusing on gender.
- It is unusually comprehensive in covering its topic from pre-Imperial China to modern times.
- It includes discussion of both ethnic Han and non-Han cultures and the impact of their differences on women and power.
- It benefits from nine years of teaching experience by the author in teaching these subjects to undergraduates in two universities in Hong Kong.

The book's elaboration of the means by which women obtained, exercised, and retained power in a society that was formally ruled by a succession of male emperors illuminates the evolution of a number of social issues. For example, the influence of the maternal relatives of the emperor—influence that often extended to *de facto* rule of the empire—was countered by policies and practices that had far-reaching consequences, such as the rise to power of the palace eunuchs when an emperor sought allies in a conflict with these

powerful relatives.

The changing role and status of women in imperial China was also a product of the changes that came with the successive waves of conquest by nomadic peoples. As the book demonstrates, women in the nomadic societies had greater power and independence than in traditional Han Chinese society. This was reflected at the highest levels in the influence that women in the palace were able to exercise. Unfortunately, during these periods of “alien” rule, this also resulted in changes in a number of the traditional practices of the subject people, such as the ownership of the marriage dowry. These changes tended to persist long after the Mandate of Heaven had moved on to a new Han dynasty or another nomadic conqueror. They often proved detrimental to women’s position in society and gave rise to such anomalies as encouraging widow suicide and praising it as a virtuous practice.

Throughout the centuries of social change and development that constitute the fabric of China’s rich history, we can identify a number of persistent concerns and issues, such as the need to provide for the imperial succession, the influence of maternal relatives on the management of the state, and relations between China and potential threats to its sovereignty, in which women played prominent and sometimes dominant roles.

In the Epilog, the author summarizes the changing status of women in China, discussing their role in areas such as religion, law, and imperial politics, and extends this analysis into the post-imperial period up to modern times.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the two universities in Hong Kong where I taught—the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST)—for making this book possible. I had started with teaching at two universities in the United States, then went on to work in university administration and other management positions. When Professor Billy So gave me the opportunity to return to teaching, I had to catch up on 20 years of reading and was pleasantly surprised and encouraged to find that much has been written in the field of China regarding women and that my book, *Palace Women of the Northern Sung*, had been well read and cited over this period of time.

As I look back upon my life, I would like to give special recognition to the many who have helped me along and made my life rewarding in learning, teaching and management positions. Apart from the professors who guided me in my studies, I was fortunate to have my sister, Professor Julia Ching, baby-sit for me while I took my 24-hour research examination at the University of Pennsylvania. She also made it possible for me to contribute to the Sung Biographies, edited by Herbert Franke. On my graduation, Professor Winberg Chai recruited me as an Assistant Professor of Asian Studies at the City College of New York. Family reasons necessitated a move to Honolulu and I was fortunate to meet Professor Daniel W.Y. Kwok at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, who was kind enough to help me obtain a position as Visiting Scholar at the History Department of the Manoa Campus where I was able to do research and writing on my book on palace women. I owe enormous debts to both Professors Brian McKnight and Daniel Kwok for the publication of the book. Brian read the different drafts and I owe the success of the book to his advice and encouragement. Dan recommended that I approach E. J. Brill for the publication of the book in the T'oung Pao Monographies. I must also thank E. J. Brill for giving me the digital rights on the book so that it could be published in Kindle format.

I never lost my interest in research and writing and I thank Dr. Lily Xiao Hong Lee who made it possible for me to work on the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women*, a project at the University of Sydney.

This book would not have been possible without the help of Professor Richard L. Davis. Over the last four years he spent time reading the drafts, recommended research sources, and gave advice both in person and over email.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my husband, Professor Peter N. Dobson, Jr., Emeritus Professor of Physics of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He was my copy editor on the drafts. He then undertook the conversion of the typed manuscript into Kindle format. The numerous notes in the book made the conversion less than routine.

Peter also converted *Palace Women of the Northern Sung* to Kindle format. To do so, he had to first scan the entire book, page by page, use optical character recognition to provide a draft of the text from the scanned images, and then manually type in the Chinese characters in the Glossary. This latter task was a challenging learning experience for him as he does not read and write Chinese.

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Introduction

In Europe, daughters of kings were able to inherit the throne if there were no surviving sons. This is probably due to the fact that European monarchs were Christians and could only have one wife at a time and only her children were legitimate. One wife could only give birth to a limited number of children. With the high rate of child mortality, young boys did not necessarily survive childhood. The first wife of King Henry VIII (r.1509-1547) of England gave birth to a daughter. As a Catholic, Henry could not divorce his wife nor acquire secondary wives. He left the Catholic Church to divorce his first wife to remarry and try again for a legitimate male heir. King Henry had a total of six wives; the marriages to two of these wives were annulled, two wives were beheaded, one died following birth complications and the sixth wife survived him. Three of his wives each gave birth to one child—two daughters and one son. All three of his heirs succeeded him. The first to succeed him was his nine year old son, Edward VI. He was to be guided by a regency council until he was eighteen. Unfortunately, the young king became ill and died at the age of fifteen. He was succeeded by the daughter of Henry's first wife, Mary I (r.1553-1558), who ruled for only five years, and left no heirs. She was then succeeded by Henry's younger daughter, Queen Elizabeth I (r.1558-1603), who never married and had a long reign.

In Imperial China¹ women were by tradition excluded from inheriting the throne even though there was no Salic law (the exclusion of females from the inheritance of a throne or fief). In a majority of cases there was a male heir as the emperor could have one legal wife, his empress, as well as many concubines/consorts. The heir was usually the eldest son of the empress. If she did not have a son, the first born of an imperial consort could succeed or the emperor could choose the son of his favorite wife as his heir. At times there might still be no surviving male heir and the emperor would have to adopt sons from members of the imperial clan and groom them to be the next ruler. Four of the fifteen emperors of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) were adopted heirs. Three were adopted because the

previous emperor had no heirs; another replaced the legitimate heir as a result of a coup.

While women could not inherit the throne and be the legitimate emperors, they could rule as regents as their tenure was considered temporary. The paternal relatives were thought to be dangerous since it was feared they could usurp the throne. There are many examples in history of the usurpation of the throne by paternal relatives. The second emperor of the Song Dynasty (960-1279)² succeeded his elder brother claiming that this was in accord with the wishes of his mother. The third emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) rebelled against his nephew and usurped the throne. Both usurpers had long successful reigns and their heirs succeeded them as emperors. Thus, brothers and adult young sons of emperors were feared and often sent away from the capital.

There were three historical conditions under which an empress could act as regent. The first condition was when the emperor was too young to govern (usually less than 17 *sui*)³; the second, when the emperor was too ill to attend to affairs; and the third, when the emperor was unexpectedly removed.⁴ The regent was usually the most senior widow. She might be the mother, the grandmother or even the great grandmother of the emperor. She was not necessarily a biological relative of the heir but had to have been the lawful empress of a former emperor. Many of these women ruled in very trying and uncertain times; some had to negotiate surrender terms while the young heirs fled to safety.⁵

The regent worked with the senior officials, who may or may not be related to her. Strong regents were *de facto* rulers. Weak ones were figureheads, delegating authority to their relatives or to civil officials who made decisions in her name. Strong regents who refused to step down were able to do so if they were viewed as good rulers. Despite negative feelings towards female rule, it was frequently a necessity and many women were praised as being great rulers. Sima Qian, for example, praised Empress Dowager Lü (241-180 B.C.E.) of

the Han Dynasty and entitled his chapter covering the period of her rule as ‘Basic Annals of Empress Dowager.’

The senior widow, even if not a regent, could still be powerful. She was an influence for stability when the emperor was weak. As the senior living member of the previous generation, she enjoyed an authority and legitimacy within the imperial family that no one could challenge. Whenever the succession to the throne was in question, the senior widow issued the edict (*zhao*) enthroning the new emperor. She had powers of spouse selection and the enthronement or dethronement of the next emperor. She had these powers even if she was only a child. This can be seen in the case of the 15 *sui* Empress Dowager Shangguan (ca. 89 B.C.E.-37 B.C.) of the Early Han.⁶ Her maternal grandfather used her position to dethrone and enthrone emperors.

The senior widow and her family were powerful since they were the chief means of support for the emperor. Theoretically, the emperor’s word was law but at times his powers would be limited by his ministers who reasoned that he should not trouble himself with specific decisions and actions of government. In their view, he should leave all such matters to the ministers who were selected on the basis of merit. When emperors became frustrated by such interference, they often tried to break the power of the bureaucracy. They used allies among those close to him such as his paternal and maternal relatives or the eunuchs. Among these groups of allies, the maternal relatives were thought safest. She and her relatives provided support both against the ambitions of the princes and against the larger bureaucracy. The death of a senior widow sometimes led to the downfall of her clan and the end of the emperor’s wife who had been selected by her.

The emperor could be surrounded by many sets of maternal relatives: his titular grandmother’s; his biological grandmother’s; his titular mother’s; his biological mother’s; his wife’s, and the relatives of the mother of the heir. Families hoped to gain political power and

prestige by marrying a daughter to the heir-apparent. During the emperor's youth, they could rule in his name as regents or co-regents. Family members could also be named to high positions in government. If successful, the family could gain great influence, especially if the daughter gave birth to the next ruler. If a family was successful in having their female members named empresses for several generations, the top layer of the bureaucracy would be dominated by maternal relatives. But the position of any one family was highly unstable. The death of an influential widow was often followed by a violent shake-up of the administration and her family could face persecution.⁷

Palace Women in Imperial China

In imperial China, women lived and worked in the palaces as wives, palace officials and as serving women. Like male officials, these women were ranked and paid. They had their own system responsible for law, order and punishments within the palaces, in some ways similar to the role the Censorate played in dealing with male officials. The earliest reference to women working in the palaces can be found in the *Zhouli* (The Rites of the Zhou Dynasty).⁸ Organizations staffed and controlled by palace women existed in all the dynasties of imperial China.⁹ Women who worked in the palaces were able to rise within the organizations. Some were promoted to the high positions as imperial consorts and empresses if they were able to get the favor of the emperor. In these high positions, they were able to get official appointments for their family members and allies. But, catching the eye of the emperor was not without its dangers. For example, Emperor Guangzong (1147-1200) had a very jealous empress, Li. Once, a palace woman held a basin of water for him to wash his hands and he complimented her on having beautiful hands. The next day, a dish at his meal contained the hands that he had so admired the day before.¹⁰

Working palace women had functional power within their areas of responsibilities. Through the increased wealth and social prestige of their places in the palace, they were able to advance their families through education and sponsorship for civil service examinations. Their male family members could gain direct entry into officialdom. Their female family members also became desirable marriage partners.¹¹

Aside from the palace women who were married or recruited into the palace, there were many other categories of women within the palaces. There were the women who were related by blood to the emperors—daughters, sisters, or aunts—the princesses. Since these women and their children could not succeed to the throne they were non-threatening relatives to the ruler and could remain in the capital.

The princesses were used by the rulers to form marriage alliances and so at times were remarried if they were widowed or divorced. They could be influential if they were the favorite sisters or daughters of the emperor, the biological daughters of the regent, or if they formed alliances with the favorite imperial concubine. The only instance of a princess who was proposed as the heir to succeed the emperor was a princess of the Tang Dynasty, Princess Anle (d.710).

Most of the imperial families in the 1,000 years of recorded history were not ethnic Han. They came from Inner Asia to the north of China proper.¹² Some scholars have suggested that the relatively high status of women in non-Han society, where survival in the harsh environment required strong women, explains the high political profile of imperial wives and princesses, the only female emperor, and the only female recommended for heir-apparent.¹³

Non-Han Rule in China

For half of Chinese history, China was ruled either in part or in whole by nomadic people of non-Han origin from north of the Chinese border. These nomadic conquerors were of different ethnic origins but belonged to major ethnic groups such as the Turks, Mongols, Manchu, and their ancestors. Throughout history, they threatened settled peoples from China to Russia and Hungary, including Iran, India, the Byzantine Empire, and Egypt from the fourth century B.C.E. to the fifteenth century C.E. They eventually migrated westward in the second and third centuries. These nomads looted the Chinese border areas and at times were able to move further into China. When China was strong she would bribe these nomads with gifts. When China was weak, the non-Han looters found themselves with conquered territories that they had to defend and govern.¹⁴

The non-Han emperors ruled in the style of Chinese emperors. They preferred to adopt the Chinese system of government as it allowed them to centralize power, control succession, and gain the acceptance of the majority of their subjects who were of Han origin. Under most of these dynasties, the majority Han did not have to adopt non-Han practices. The non-Han dynasties practiced dual or multi-ethnic administration. The Han majority population was ruled by Han Chinese law and the ethnic groups were ruled by their tribal practices and traditions.

The Han Chinese accepted foreign rule principally for pragmatic reasons as they were living under the military might of the conquerors. Historic and hereditary reasons may also be the reason of their easy acceptance. Early Chinese dynasties may not have been all Han. While the Chinese of the Xia Dynasty (c.2070 B.C.E.-c. 1600 B.C.E.) are thought of as Han, recent studies suggest that the people of the Shang Dynasty (c.1600 B.C.E.-c. 1046 B.C.E.) spoke a different language and may not have been of Han origin. The ancestors of the Zhou Dynasty (c.1046 B.C.E.-c. 256 B.C.E.) may also have been of a different ethnic group since their surnames were those of the Rong

ethnic people. The Zhou people also differed from the Han Chinese in customs, culture, and language.^{15,16}

Most Han officials also believed two elements were important in judging the legitimacy of a dynasty, 'that the emperor was virtuous and that he ruled China as a unified empire.' The quality of governance is judged from a pragmatic point of view with little reference to the ethnic factor. Their ethnic identities were not highlighted nor were they hidden. While the Chinese accepted foreign rule, there were power struggles between the Chinese and the tribal leaders and racial hatred was a problem for the emperor. The non-Han tribal leaders would often rebel when they felt their power or cultural traditions threatened.

Succession

The Chinese succession model was lineal, that is, the son of the emperor succeeded to the throne. The advantage is that there is no question as to who will be the next emperor and the heir-apparent can be given respected tutors beginning at an early age. The disadvantage of this arrangement is that if the successor is not competent or if he is under age the power could be in the hands of maternal relatives or of different regents. For example, the incompetent second emperor of the Jin Dynasty (265-420) ruled under eight different regents. Power struggles led to the War of the Eight Princes. Invasions of non-Han from the north forced the Jin court south and the north became a battlefield between non-Han tribes who then established short-lived dynasties in Northern China.¹⁷

The nomadic tribes were often at war and in such a society the state needed adult competent, mature warrior leaders. The non-Han succession was at times by election of the best candidate for the job; usually the one with the greatest military power. They also preferred fraternal succession, meaning succession by brothers. In such a system, the brothers would succeed each other. After the death of the youngest brother, the throne was to return to the son of the eldest brother. This meant that numerous persons felt they were entitled to the throne; the brothers as well as their descendants. In this system, the senior widow only acts as regent until a new election was held. However, the process of holding an election might take a number of years, as the nomadic tribes had to gather together for the election.

When the nomads governed China, which had a settled population, they no longer needed warrior leaders. When the non-Han emperor had consolidated his power he wanted to control succession and give the throne to his own son and not to one of his brothers. The attempt to change from fraternal to lineal succession often led to great difficulties, with each brother thinking he should be

the rightful heir. An example is that of the Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577) which only lasted about 77 years due to the power struggles between the brothers.

The conquering general of the Northern Qi, Gao Huan (496-547) was married to a Xianbei woman surnamed Lou (501-562)¹⁸ who gave birth to six of his fifteen sons. After his death, his eldest son, Gao Cheng (521-549), continued his father's conquests but was thought to have been assassinated by his brother, Gao Yang (529-559) who proclaimed a new dynasty and named himself Wenxundi (r.550-559). He made his son his heir following the Chinese tradition of lineal succession. He asked his next brother, Gao Yan (535-561), the future Xiaozhaodi (r.560-561) not to kill his son should he want to take the throne. After Gao Yang's death, the son succeeded to the throne but soon had to abdicate as his grandmother, Lou, preferred to have her own son rule rather than her grandson.¹⁹

Gao Yan ascended the throne and in late 560, made his son the heir. This angered his brother, Gao Dan (537-569) who had helped him take the throne and had expected to succeed him. A year later, Gao Yan was critically injured after falling from a horse and he asked Gao Dan to spare the life of his son and consort. But, on ascending the throne as Wuchengdi (r.561-569), Gao Dan ordered the death of the heir. Having gone through the turmoil and bloodshed of the different succession of his brothers, Gao Dan took the advice of one of his officials, retired, and made his son, Gao Wei (557-577), emperor. Since the new emperor was only eight years of age the retired emperor continued to be responsible for major decisions; however, it was felt that the succession would hold as his son was officially the emperor. After the death of the retired emperor, there was one unsuccessful attempt of usurpation of the throne by the emperor's younger brother with the support of their birth mother.²⁰ This kind of instability in succession, with bloody coups between brothers in different non-Han dynasties, eventually resulted in the Qing Emperor Yongzheng (1722-1735) setting up a system of having the chosen successor's name placed in a box to be opened upon the death of the

Marriage

Han Chinese practiced serial monogamy—one principal wife at a time—with concubinage. The principal wife came from a similar social background and the marriage was an alliance between two families. The bride was given a dowry which often included land and this was kept by her, taken into remarriages and inherited by her children after her death. The Han Chinese woman remained a member of her family until her death and she could not inherit from her husband or his family.

The non-Han tribes practiced polygyny; that is, there could be multiple principle wives of equal status. The system also included minor wives and captive wives. The non-Han male had to pay a heavy bride-price for his bride that might include herd animals as well as years of labor. When a non-Han woman married, she became a full member of her husband's family and her dowry became part of the family's possessions. As a full member of the family she could inherit at her husband's death. As a widow, if she were economically independent she could remain as a small family unit within her deceased husband's family. If she was incapable of supporting herself she would be taken as wife by a male member of her deceased husband's family; the next husband could be her deceased husband's brother, his uncle, nephew, even his son provided the son was not her own biological son. This marriage system, called levirate, was widely practiced by nomads including the ancient Hebrews.

The levirate system is practical: the steppe people lived a hard life and needed a support network to survive. Within this system, a widow and her children are taken care of after the husband's death. The practice also reflected economic realities. The husband's family had paid a substantial bride price and in doing so, the family had acquired the reproductive, economic and social services of the woman, and so the family retained these rights in her even after the

death of her husband. If the family remarried her to another man outside the family, a bride-price would also have to be paid to the family of the deceased husband.²²

Although the non-Han ruling families adopted some Chinese practices, they also retained some of their traditional ones. Examples of remarriages and levirate marriages can be found in the History of the Northern Qi. At least one of Gao Huan's wives had two husbands before her marriage to him and at least two of his wives remarried after his death. Of all the wives and concubines of Northern Qi rulers, with biographies, 50 percent of the women who survived long enough to remarry did so. Among empresses, 75 percent are known to have remarried. One third of the women who remarried became wives of the incoming ruler, usually a brother of the late husband. Among concubines of the royal house, 13 percent remarried a member of the Gao family. Therefore, the passing of wives of one ruler to the successor was an accepted practice in Northern China during the sixth century.²³ The most famous example of levirate marriage in Chinese history was that of Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty. She was an imperial concubine of the second emperor but after his death married his son, the third emperor. The only dynasty that required Chinese women to practice levirate was that of the Mongol Yuan who were concerned that, as a small minority, they might lose their cultural traditions and be absorbed by the majority Han Chinese population.²⁴ Instead, they tried to force the Han Chinese to adopt Mongol traditions and practices.

The non-Han peoples used marriage alliances to build their empires and the emperor's wives and consorts might be of different ethnic groups. Genghis Khan used his five daughters' marriages to prepare for his conquests along the silk route. He told his daughters that they were sent to govern. His daughters rode horses and led armies. He made his sons-in-law divorce their other wives; the sons-in-law were then absorbed into his army.²⁵ The Han Chinese married their princesses to non-Han tribal leaders but did not take in non-Han women as imperial consorts until the Ming Dynasty.

Organization of the Book

This is an introduction to Chinese history covering pre-imperial to modern times. While Chinese history books typically give little attention to women, this book focuses on gender and the practices of both the Chinese Han dynasties and the dynasties of the non-Han conquerors from Inner Asia. It examines the role of women as revealed through their biographies.

The book does not require the reader to be familiar with Chinese history. Each Part of the book provides an overview of a specific historical period. The chapters within each Part discuss topics regarding women within that historical period.

Part I

Chapter One provides an overview of a period that spanned more than two millennia, from about 2070 B.C.E to 618 C.E. It begins with the dynasties before recorded history as revealed by archaeological discoveries and the historical records of the Han Dynasty historian, Sima Qian. It examines the conquests of China by its northern nomadic neighbors. These different non-Han tribes began by looting China, but when the Chinese forces were pushed back, the tribes found themselves occupying land in Northern China. They then declared their own dynasties and ruled in the style of Chinese emperors. In time and through numerous wars, one of these tribes was able to conquer the south and unite China. By 589 C.E., all China was under non-Han rule.

Chapter Two looks at the role of women in ancient times. Archaeological findings show that women had an important role in religion, as goddesses and as shamans. Women's status appears to have declined by Shang times as society became patriarchal and patrilineal. Gender differentiation already existed by that time and boys were more valued than girls. Royal women still played important roles in the early Zhou as emissaries of the kings. But by Late Zhou, their role was limited to duties within the palace. An

analysis of a book written in the Han, using examples from pre-Han times, is presented to show how women were perceived by the Han author.

Chapter Three is devoted to the Han Dynasty—a dynasty when women and their maternal relatives held great power through many reigns. One of the maternal relatives became so powerful that he usurped the throne and created a short dynasty. The imperial family needed allies to oust the usurper and reestablish the Han Dynasty. The revived dynasty was not strong and needed powerful allies. The emperor married women from powerful families and in so doing, had to share power with maternal relatives who then became very strong. When the maternal relatives became too powerful, the emperors turned to eunuchs for assistance to drive them out, with the result that the eunuchs became powerful. Thus began the end of the dynasty when generals marched to the capital against the eunuchs. The Chinese consider history to be a ‘mirror.’ They look to history for good examples and ways to avoid disasters. The power of palace women and their maternal relatives during this era was responsible for the ways that subsequent dynasties dealt with this problem.

Chapter Four looks at the great non-Han empresses during a time when different non-Han tribes were battling over sovereignty in northern China. The first of these women gained power through fostering the young heirs. She ruled twice as regent and did not step down when the emperor came of age. The second woman was of Han ethnicity and ruled twice as regent over a non-Han dynasty as she was the biological mother of the young emperor. The third great empress never ruled as regent, but she and her husband were known as ‘the two sage emperors.’ Their son and successor conquered southern China and unified China after 398 years. All of China was now under non-Han rule whereas previously the south had remained under the rule of ethnic Han emperors.

Part II

Chapter Five looks at the great Tang Dynasty as well as the

following period, known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. The Tang was divided into two parts. Early Tang was prosperous but a rebellion changed everything, and when the rebellion was crushed the country was in shambles. Central government was weak. Power was in the hands of military generals. When the Tang ended, China was again fragmented with five dynasties succeeding each other in the north and ten kingdoms battling each other in the south.

This chapter also looks at women in the Tang. These include a powerful woman who usurped the throne and declared herself emperor, and another woman, described as a woman premier, who served as a judge in civil service examinations and poetry competitions. The powerful princesses are also examined—the less fortunate ones as well as the ones married to the nomads in marriage alliances. The chapter concludes with a brief look at the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms as well as the women living during that era.

Chapter Six takes a closer look at the great Female Emperor and of the empresses and consorts during the Tang. It concludes by looking at reasons for the rise and fall of these women.

Part III

Chapter Seven shows how the geopolitics of China, after the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, changed the face of China. Rather than having a united China, or a China divided between the north and the south, China was now divided into three different dynasties: the ethnic Han dynasty named the Song, a neighboring non-Han dynasty in the northwest (the Western Xia) and another neighboring non-Han dynasty (the Liao) to the northeast. The Liao was conquered by a different nomadic group, founding a new dynasty named the Jin (Gold). All were conquered by the Mongols and China was again united under a non-Han dynasty, the Yuan.

Chapter Eight looks at the great non-Han warrior empresses and the ethnic Han regents. The non-Han warrior empresses had their

own armies. The ones of the Western Xia co-ruled with their brothers. They led armies against the Song and were most often victorious. The warrior empresses of the Liao had their own ordo (military units made up of cavalry as well as foot soldiers). The first empress of the Liao helped her husband conquer and found the dynasty. Other Liao empresses also led armies and ruled as regents. As for the Song, nine empress dowagers ruled as regents. Their style of governance depended on the politics and needs of the times.

Part IV

Chapter Nine covers the rule of the Mongols and its impact on Chinese women. After conquering China, the one million Mongols had to rule over seventy million non-Mongols, sixty million of whom had never experienced non-Han rule. The Mongols tried to have the Chinese adopt Mongol practices. The most devastating practice required that a woman give up ownership of the dowry. This impoverished widows and resulted in desperate widows committing suicide. The Ming abolished levirate but kept the Mongol practice regarding ownership of the dowry. Destitute widows, throughout the Ming and Qing, committed suicide. The suicide of women began to be considered praiseworthy and meritorious, interpreted as women keeping themselves chaste for their deceased husbands. Widow suicide was an enduring feature throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Part V

Chapter Ten deals with the historical developments of the last two dynasties of China, the rule of the ethnic Han Ming and the Manchu Qing. Succession was a problem in both dynasties. The early Ming saw the usurpation of a paternal relative. The uncle of the young second emperor marched on his nephew and took over the throne. Manchu succession had its own problems and a method was established whereby the name of the successor would be placed in a secret box. This made it impossible to properly train an heir. The end of the Ming was similar to that of preceding dynasties when natural

disasters and wide-spread famine caused rebellions. The end of the Qing was very different as it had to confront the West with its more advanced technologies. When reform of the Qing government failed, Han Chinese rose in rebellion, the emperor abdicated, and a republic was established.

Chapter Eleven looks at the palace women of the Ming and Qing. Both Han Chinese and nomads from the north used marriage for alliance purposes. The first Ming emperor used marriage to reward his allies. Then, fearing the influence of powerful families, he decreed that imperial women must not be from powerful families. Subsequently, recruitment from commoner families occurred periodically as need arose. This resulted in the emperors not having powerful allies and thus becoming dependent on eunuch support. The Qing wanted to establish their legitimacy by claiming descent from an earlier Jin (Gold) dynasty, established by their ancestors. They also wanted legitimacy for their rule from the Mongol Yuan dynasty. Thus the ideal marriages were with the Mongols, especially those descended of Genghis Khan. Both of these dynasties had foreign women in their harems. The Ming had captive women as well as Korean women sent as tribute from Korea. The Qing dynasty used marriage to bond the banners²⁶ closer to them. Manchus were forbidden to marry Han Chinese except from those in the Han Chinese banners.

Epilog

The final chapter of this book, the Epilog, looks at the changing role of women from historical times to the modern era. It explores the role of women in religion, Confucianism, law, the military, imperial politics, and post-imperial politics to show how women's status changed. It also considers how women may achieve equality in contemporary times.

Part I

c. 2070 B.C.E.-618 C.E.

Chapter One

Ancient China to the Unification of China Under Non-Han Rule

Chinese history covers thousands of years. The first dynasty in China, described in the historical records, was the Xia (c.2070-1600 B.C.E.) The Xia was later conquered by the Shang/Yin (c.1600–1046 B.C.E.) which in turn was conquered by the Zhou (c.1046-258 B.C.E.). The Zhou Dynasty was made up of city-states, with its capital at present day Xian. The power of the Zhou court gradually weakened until the Zhou kings ruled in name only, with true power in the hands of powerful nobles. Towards the end of the dynasty, the nobles declared themselves to be kings. They fought each other until the head of the Qin state—Qin Shihuangdi—united China in 221 B.C.E. Imperial China refers to the period from the time Qin Shihuangdi (259-210 B.C.E.) united China and established the Qin Dynasty in 221 B.C.E. to the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. One of the most important achievements of the Qin dynasty was the centralization of the written system, which had a unifying effect on the Chinese culture for thousands of years. The existence of these dynasties has been confirmed by archaeological findings at locations mentioned in the ancient historical texts such as *Bamboo Annals (Zhúshū Jinián)*, *Book of Documents (shujing)*, *Classic of History (shujing)* and the *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, written by the great Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) historian, Sima Qian (d.86 B.C.E.).

The Han Dynasty, established after the overthrow of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.E.), was one of the greatest dynasties of China. To this day, the Chinese refer to themselves as people of the Han. This was a time when China sent emissaries into Inner and Central Asia to seek allies against the Inner Asian invaders, the Xiongnu. Roman history describes the visit of Chinese envoys to the first Roman Emperor (27 B.C.E.-14 C.E.). Later, an emissary, Ban Chao (d.102 C.E.), went as far west as the Caspian Sea (between Asia and European Russia) and established direct military contacts with the empires

there. In 97 C.E., Ban Chao sent another emissary to the Roman Emperor. These contacts stimulated an increase of the trade of Chinese silk, African ivory, and Roman incense through the nomads who traded along the Silk Road.¹

Nomadic Conquerors²

The conquerors of China were nomads from Inner Asia who lived in the steppe areas of Inner Asia. They were of different ethnic origins but belonged to major ethnic groups such as the Turks, Mongols, Manchu, and their ancestors. They had no common language and most had not developed written ones. Their histories were written by their enemies, such as the Chinese. The nomads were mounted archers who used harassment and indirect maneuvers before they delivered the final blow. This tactic enabled them to attack from bases far away and overcome problems of logistics.

Throughout history, they threatened settled peoples from China to Russia and Hungary—including Iran, India, the Byzantine Empire, and Egypt. Periodically, they would be united under the leadership of a brilliant commander such as Genghis Khan (1162-1227). Genghis and his sons built the Mongol Empire that remains the largest contiguous empire in the history of the world. At its height, it covered an area of 33,000,000 sq km (12,741,000 sq mi)—22% of the Earth's total land area, with a population of 100 million. Beginning in the Mongolian steppes, the empire stretched from Europe to the Sea of Japan, covering Siberia in the north and extending southward into Southeast Asia, the Indian sub-continent, and the Middle East.³[\[View Map\]](#)

The nomadic conquerors of China came from a very inhospitable homeland that is made up of the Tundra, the Forest Zone, the Steppes, and Deserts.

- The Tundra is an Arctic wasteland with plants that are mostly moss, dwarf shrubs, and berry-carrying bushes. Its climate is bitterly cold with the temperatures during the long winter at -100F; the summers are short and cool with average July temperature less than 60F. Strong arctic winds often sweep across the unprotected landscapes. The soil is often frozen and there is deep snow cover in many areas. It is close to the Arctic and this contributes to a high frequency of clouds and fogs over the land. The reindeer is the dominant animal.
- The Forest Zone is a large area that is mostly evergreen coniferous forests forming extensive tree cover. The climate is sub-arctic with long winters: average January temperatures ranging from -40F in the north to 14F in the

south. The summers are brief and cool with a July average temperature of about 65F. The southern part is mixed forest as in northeastern Manchuria. In addition to reindeers there are many kinds of large animals, including elk, deer, bear and lynx as well as tigers in the southern parts of Siberia and Manchuria.

- The Steppes are made up of grasslands from north of the Black Sea to the plains of Manchuria. The western steppe includes the Ukraine, the northern Caucuses and southern Urals and the Kirgiz steppe. The eastern steppe includes the extensive grasslands in the eastern and central areas of Mongolia and the Manchurian prairies. The winters are cold and dry and the summers are moderately warm. Dry air masses come into the steppe lands during the prolonged winter and bring the average January temperatures to -10F and 10F. The most severe winters are in Mongolia because of its interior location and mountain borders: a -17F January temperature at Urumuchi, and in Harbin the temperature drops down to -4F. For both areas, the average number of sub-freezing months is five. Summers are warm with a July temperature between 65F and 75F.
- The Desserts consist of the Gobi, which merges into the Ala Shan Desert north of the Gansu Corridor, and the Ordos Desert. The western part of the Ala Shan is known as the Little Gobi. The Ordos is vast and largely bare of vegetation. The winters are short and last only about one or two months in the southern areas where the average temperatures are below freezing. Summers are hot with a mean July temperature over 85F. In the south the temperatures sometimes rise as high as 120F.[\[View Map\]](#)^{4,5}

To survive, the nomads had to find camps for the winter in areas that provided shelter from the wind and yet had sufficient pasture for their animals. In the spring, they moved into the grasslands where the spring rains had helped the grass grow and the melted snow provided drinking water. When the spring grass dried and the pools of water evaporated, they moved their animals to the summer pastures and at the beginning of the cold weather they returned to their winter camps.⁶

These nomads launched waves of invasions into China with the purpose of obtaining loot from raids, trading rights, and subsidies from what they perceived as a prosperous China. China was agreeable to giving the nomads subsidies and trading rights as this was less expensive than going to war. Unfortunately, when the Chinese government was unstable, faced with natural disasters, or at war, it was not able to cope with the nomads' incursions and would retreat from the raids. The nomads suddenly found themselves occupying Chinese territory that they were forced to administer and defend

against other nomadic tribes.⁷

As early as the Han dynasty, the Xiongnu, a confederation of nomadic tribes from Inner Asia, conquered and controlled a large steppe empire extending west as far as the Caucasus during the third century B.C.E. The Xiongnu had been raiding China since the Warring Kingdoms Period of the Zhou dynasty. In the winter of 200 B.C.E, the founding emperor of the Han personally led an army against the Xiongnu but he was ambushed by about 300,000 elite Xiongnu cavalry. The emperor was cut off from supplies and reinforcements for seven days, only narrowly escaping capture. A first treaty was signed between the Han and the Xiongnu. The treaty was called '*Heqin*' (literally, 'peace marriage') as it included an agreement that the Han dynasty give a princess in marriage to the leader of the Xiongnu. This first treaty set the pattern for relations between the Han and Xiongnu. This pattern was repeated throughout Chinese imperial history between the rulers of China and its northern neighbors.⁸

Under this first treaty, the Han dynasty would make fixed annual payments of silk, wine, grain and other foodstuffs to the Xiongnu. A princess was to be given in marriage to the Supreme Xiongnu leader. The Xiongnu and the Han were ranked as equal states. The Great Wall was the official boundary between the two states. In 192 B.C.E., Mao Dun, the great Xiongnu leader, even asked for the hand of the widow of the founding emperor of the Han, Empress Dowager Lü. Mao Dun's son and successor continued his father's expansionist policies and succeeded in negotiating terms for a large-scale market system and the hand of another princess in marriage. By 135 B.C.E., the treaty was renewed nine times with an increase of gifts by the Han with each subsequent agreement. During the Han dynasty, at least thirteen princesses were given in marriage to the Xiongnu⁹ but none of them were the sisters or daughters of the emperor. They were palace women or daughters of nobles who had offended the throne. After they were chosen, they would be adopted by the emperor, then given in marriage to the Xiongnu Shanyu.¹⁰

During the Han dynasty, the Xiongnu had invaded China but appeared satisfied with bribes and markets in border towns from China. They had no desire to occupy Chinese territory as that meant having to govern the Han Chinese and to defend their conquests. When the Han dynasty ended, China entered into a period of chaos with three different warlords claiming to have the mandate of heaven (Three Kingdoms Period: 220-280). All three different kingdoms were governed by rulers of Han origin.¹¹ These three kingdoms were eventually united into one empire under a general of Han origin, Sima Yan (236-290), who proclaimed a new Jin Dynasty (265-420). Unfortunately, the founder had to rely on assistance from many allies and so in rewarding them the empire was divided into nineteen provinces and princes were named to manage them. Another 28 members of the Sima family were enfeoffed and so power was decentralized and internal conflicts quickly weakened the dynasty and the unification lasted only about 10 years.

The second Jin emperor was developmentally challenged and factions fought to control the imperial court. His reign went through seven regencies. The father of the Empress Dowager Yang Zhi (d.291), the second wife of the founding emperor, was the first regent. The last regent was the wife of the young emperor, Jia (257-300). Initially, Yang Zhi and her clan were powerful. The young emperor's wife enlisted the help of the imperial princes, imprisoned the Empress Dowager and starved her to death. By 292, Jia had got rid of both the Yang clan and of the powerful princes. She was in full control of the court, ruling in her husband's name. The surviving princes rose in revolt against her. Jia was killed and her husband was forced to abdicate. Eight imperial princes then battled for power in a struggle recorded by history as the War of the Eight Princes (291-306).¹²

One of the princes had asked a Xiongnu leader, Liu Yuan (d.130), a direct descendant of Mao Dun and a Han princess for assistance. When the imperial prince was defeated, Liu Yuan declared himself Prince of Han calling himself a descendant of the Han dynasty

imperial house. He said, 'I am also a nephew of the Han; we are elder and younger brothers. When the elder brother dies, the younger succeeds.' His claim is based on the non-Han system of fraternal succession—the right of succession by brothers and nephews.

His armies sacked the Jin dynastic capitals of Luoyang in 311 and Changan in 316 capturing and later executing the fourth and fifth Jin emperors. In 316, the Jin court moved to the area south of the Huai River. The Jin rule from then to 420 is referred to in Chinese history as the Eastern Jin. Encouraged by the success of the Xiongnu, other nomadic tribes invaded China and established kingdoms in the north. This was the beginning of a period of over 200 years when China was divided between the north and the south with the north ruled by non-Han from Inner Asia and the south by the Han Chinese (304-589); history refers to this period as the Sixteen Kingdoms Period (304-439).

The Sixteen Kingdoms

The Sixteen Kingdoms Period was a period of warring nomadic groups partitioning and establishing kingdoms in Northern China. It also began over 1,000 years of non-Han rule in China when she was ruled either in part, or in whole, by people of non-Han origin. At the end of the period, all the small kingdoms were conquered by the Tuoba, who were of Xianbei origin. The Tuoba united Northern China under the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534). After a long rule, it was divided into two parts both ruled by Tuoba puppets. Eastern Wei (534-550), was first controlled by the Erzhu clan, then by Gao Huan (496-547). Gao had married the daughter of an Erzhu general and inherited a large number of his troops. Gao Huan's son later established the Northern Qi Dynasty.¹³

The western part was not under Gao Huan's control as the forces there were under Yuwen Tai (507-556) who ruled through a different Tuoba puppet. Yuwen Tai reversed the hated law requiring everyone to have Chinese surnames. Xianbei surnames were recognized. He also stabilized his western and northern borders by bribing the Turks. When he was dying he named his nephew, Yuwen Hu (515-572), the son of his eldest brother, as regent for his sons. Yuwen Hu then deposed the Tuoba puppet and enthroned Yuwen Jue (542-57), a 14 year old son of Yuwen Tai, as emperor of a revived (Northern) Zhou Dynasty (557-581). He claimed legitimacy for the Yuwen clan through descent from an alleged ancestor, Shennong, the god of agriculture.

The Northern Zhou had a very shaky beginning as the regent, Yuwen Hu, did not want to give up his power; neither did he usurp the throne. Instead, he had two successive emperors killed in order to keep his power. Yuwen Hu was not successful with the third person he named to the throne, Wudi, (r.561-578). In 572, Wudi included his brothers in a plot to get rid of the regent. During a private audience with the empress dowager, Wudi hit Yuwen Hu over the head with the imperial scepter and Wudi's brother beheaded Yuwen Hu. Wudi died

suddenly after a 17-year reign and his son, Xuandi (r.579) ascended the throne. Xuandi's major concern was to eliminate the political roles of his uncles and the personal advisers of his deceased father. He attempted to accomplish this through both murder and divide and conquer tactics.

Xuandi's principal consort, Yang Lihua (561-609), was chosen by his father. The young lady was the daughter of Yang Jian (541-604), the powerful Duke of Sui. She was named empress when Xuandi ascended to the throne. He did not favor his empress; instead, he disliked her intensely. He tried to humiliate her with groundless accusations, then ordered her to commit suicide. When her mother learned of this, she went to the palace, and begged for her daughter's life on her knees. Xuandi rescinded the suicide order but secretly decided to exterminate the powerful Yang family. In 579, he formally retired and made his six-year old son emperor, Jingdi (r.579-581). He then claimed the title, Retired Emperor. He continued to rule and named four women as empresses (polygyny, practiced by the non-Han, allowed equal wives), one of whom was the mother of the young emperor. His favorite empress, Yuchi Chifan (566-595), had been married to a member of the imperial clan. She was said to have been beautiful and the emperor became infatuated by her. He forced her to drink then raped her. Her husband's family was enraged and made plans to rebel and support an uncle of Xuandi to be emperor. The plot was discovered and the rebellion was crushed. Xuandi executed the husband, summoned the wife to the palace and made her an imperial consort. He later elevated her to the title of empress. Xuandi died the following year and the father of the principal empress, Yang Jian, was named regent.¹⁴

Yang Jian had helped the founder of the Northern Zhou conquer and establish the dynasty. He was also connected through marriage to many royal houses. On becoming regent, Yang first eliminated the senior princes of the Northern Zhou. In 581, he proclaimed himself the first emperor, of a new Sui Dynasty (589-618). He spent the first years of his reign consolidating his rule over a Northern China that had been devastated by war. Large numbers of people had fled and millions more had died. Large areas were devastated and depopulated and had not been cultivated. He was also preoccupied by the threat of the Eastern Turks for six to seven years. After he was victorious over the Turks, he easily conquered the Later Liang in modern Hubei province. He then turned to conquest of the south.

By that time, the Eastern Jin (317-420), which had been pushed south by the nomadic kingdoms, had ended. Southern China was ruled by four different short dynasties. Different generals had been usurping the throne through intrigue, and coups. Periodically the successful usurper would try to unsuccessfully re-conquer the north. In 588, the ruling house in the south was the Chen Dynasty (557-589), Yang Jian sent a letter to the Chen ruler saying that the Sui had a heaven-imposed obligation to take over Chen territory. He issued an edict accusing the Chen ruler of bad faith, wastefulness, oppression of the people and other crimes. He pointed to the unnatural occurrences, such as floods and earthquakes, and said they were signals that Heaven had withdrawn its favor from the Chen ruler. Three thousand copies of the edict were distributed in the south to soften up resistance.

The Chen ruler was captured in 589 and forced to write to aboriginal tribal leaders in the south saying that the Chen had ended and they should give allegiance to the Sui. Nanjing, which had served as the capital of the southern dynasties for 282 years, was destroyed. Ranking Chen nobles and their prized possessions were taken to the

Sui capital and presented to the Sui ancestors. The Chen nobles and elite were then forgiven for their crimes and the princes given land in the border areas while some were taken into service by the Sui. The reunification of China was now complete under a non-Han emperor. The south became an important source of wealth and reserves.

It was not easy to govern a new unified China as there were regional and racial differences as well as inter-racial violence and hatred. Northern China had been ravaged by war among the non-Han tribes struggling for supremacy and control. Large areas had fallen out of cultivation and were depopulated as people had fled and millions had been killed. The northern population was mixed since there had been successive waves of conquerors and those had intermarried with the Chinese. The south had a different and more distinctive Han Chinese civilization as the land had always been under Han Chinese rule and the population had not intermarried with the nomadic conquerors. The south was more productive as the climate was more conducive to agriculture. No wars had been fought on the land as political changes were due to intrigues in court. Sixteen percent of the total southern population was concentrated in the major centers along the Yangzi. Behind that, lay an untamed wilderness where hostile aborigines lived.[\[View Table\]](#)¹⁶

The founding emperor and his empress had five sons and the eldest was named heir. The second son, Yang Guang (r.604-17), was very ambitious and wanted to succeed to the throne. He saw an opportunity to plot his brother's downfall when he was visiting his mother. At that time, his older brother was infatuated with one of his consorts and did not favor his principal consort. His mother was very fond of the principal consort who had suddenly died under suspicious circumstances. Yang Guang took this opportunity to create suspicions in the minds of his parents. They deposed the heir and named him as the successor.

When Yang Guang succeeded as the second Sui emperor, he wanted to extend Sui power into the former Han Dynasty territories of

the northwest and into northern Korea. He also began large scale construction projects. He repaired the Great Wall. He built a canal network linking the Yangzi River with the Yellow River and with areas near present-day Beijing. Goods could now be transported from the south to present-day Xian, the capital of the Sui Dynasty.

Unfortunately, the cost and loss of life involved in the military and construction projects caused widespread suffering and discontent and resulted in numerous local rebellions until he was driven out of the capital. By 617, two of his grandsons were successively named as emperor by the rebels. He was given the title, 'Retired Emperor.' Yang Guang was finally murdered by the son of his most trusted general. After the collapse of his power, many rebel groups fought to replace him as the master of the great empire. The victor was his first cousin, Li Yuan (r.615-626), whose armies took the capital. Six months later a new dynasty was founded. The Tang Dynasty was built on the solid foundations left by the Sui. It would last three hundred years.

Chapter Two

Women in Ancient China

In 1986, many statues of small pregnant goddesses—surrounded by jade dragons, tortoises, birds and cicadas—dating back to 4,500-2,500 B.C.E. were unearthed in Liaoning, China. A life-sized head of a female figure, dating from 3,000 B.C.E., was also found northeast of this site. Oracle bones, used in divination¹ also referred to a ‘Western Mother’ and an ‘Eastern Mother.’ References to these goddesses can also be found in the ‘*Classic of Mountains and Oceans*’ which was written about 400-300 B.C.E. Mythology speaks of another goddess named Nüwa who created men from yellow clay, sculpting each one individually. These were the nobles. When tired, she dipped a rope in clay and flicked it around. Blobs of clay landed everywhere. Each became a person and these were the commoners. While waiting to be dried, some of these commoners melted in the rain and these were the sick or ones with physical abnormalities. Nüwa brought order from chaos by repairing the pillar attaching earth to heaven which had been broken by a male god. Scholars believe that this indicates the existence of an archaic female goddess cult; demonstrating the importance of women in ancient Chinese religion.²

Shamans (*wu*) are important in all primitive religions in different parts of the world from the earliest times to the present day. They are the intermediaries or messengers between the human world and the spirit worlds. Shamans treat ailments/illness by mending the soul and so restore the physical body of the individual to wholeness. The shaman also enters supernatural realms or dimensions to obtain solutions to problems afflicting the community. Shamans may visit other worlds/dimensions to bring guidance to misguided souls and to ameliorate illnesses of the human soul caused by foreign elements. The shaman operates primarily within the spiritual world, which in turn affects the human world. The restoration of balance results in the elimination of the ailment.³

The earliest shamans in China were women, who, because of

their ability to give life, were thought to be the natural possessors of the sacred and therefore the appropriate intermediaries between the human world and the spiritual one. Thus, shamans were originally female. It is possible that when kings began to offer sacrifices the role of the shaman became less religious. When men became shamans, the woman's role in religion became less important.⁴

After the Shang dynasty, the practice of divination lost favor. Many of the elites could not find answers to ethical questions through divination and so sought answers elsewhere. During the period of unrest in the Zhou dynasty, sixth century B.C.E., and afterwards, men such as Confucius, Mencius, Laozi and Zhuangzi focused on the place of the human in the universe and on the need to find social and natural harmony. Human destiny was increasingly associated with the activities of people and not the authority of spirits and ghosts. This brought about the development of rational philosophy and the reduction of the importance of shamans. The status of women may have declined as the importance of shamanic religion became less important.⁵

Royal Women

The status of ruling class women of the Xia, Shang and Zhou differed greatly from their status in later times. While the Shang dynasty was a patriarchal and patrilineal society, archaeological diggings show that women still assumed important roles. They were military leaders, diviners, supervisors of rituals, agricultural administrators, and keepers of state archives. Artifacts from the three tombs of the wives of King Wu Ding (ca. 1200-1181 B.C.E.) show that that he had at least sixty-four concubines. Some performed sacrifices or conducted military expeditions. Trusted women traveled between the capital and the outlying areas on the king's business serving as emissaries. Those he did not favor were given pieces of territory. The wives of rulers, who were subordinate to the Shang kings, may have presented tribute at the Shang court on behalf of their husbands. These women may themselves have been subject rulers. The overall impression is that royal wives, and possibly upper-class women in general, were respected and held positions of authority. However, women's status in the Shang was still inferior to men in the same social class.

In the spring of 1976, archaeologists discovered a richly lavished Shang tomb. The archaeologists realized that this was the tomb of the Lady Fu Hao,⁶ the wife of King Wu Ding. She had been described in previously discovered Shang oracle bones. The tomb contained over 200 bronze ritual vessels and one hundred and nine inscriptions. There were also bronze vessels, stoneware and bronze weapons, jade figures and hair combs, and bone hairpins. The weapons and ritual vessels in her tomb correlate to the oracle bone accounts of her military career and involvement in Wu Ding's ritual ancestral sacrifices. According to the findings, she:

- Was a hero among women who led military troops to attack the four border regions and participated in almost all of the famous and important wars of the Wu Ding period;
- Was a good and virtuous civil administrator;
- Gave birth to at least three children;

- Presided over sacrifices; and
- Unified the tribal allies.

In the early Zhou Dynasty, royal wives also played an active role in government. Bronze inscriptions refer to the activities of queens who had their own officers and were persons of status. The consort of King Cheng (ca.1035-1006 B.C.E.) appears in many bronze inscriptions performing functions that would normally have been those of a king. The health of a royal wife was often the subject of the king's questions to the spirits. Kings offered sacrifices to their female as well as male ancestors. Royal wives and other women could exercise considerable authority during that time. The women of the Late Zhou did not appear to have had the same kind of authority; records show that the activities of royal women were restricted to the palace even though their positions were ranked similarly to those of their counterparts in officialdom.⁷

The division of the activities of the palace into inner and outer appears to have been firmly established by the Spring and Autumn period. The kings married twelve women at one time while the subject kings married nine. The aristocrats married fewer wives, according to rank. One state would send a primary bride accompanied by a younger sister and niece while two related states would each send a secondary bride, also accompanied by a younger sister and niece, making a total of nine.⁸

The primary bride became the primary wife and the other women who accompanied her became secondary wives. This system ensured that should the primary wife fail to produce an heir there would still be an heir from her lineage, thus preserving the relationships established by marriage. These wives also served as agents for their birth states and were there to protect the interests of their lineages. Their heirs would ensure long-term friendships between their birth states and those of their husbands. There were at least nine ranks and the woman's rank determined the status of her children in the succession. This could change. A concubine could be elevated to a primary wife if she became the king's favorite and her son could

become the heir. The harem of a ruler also included concubines and maids. The size of the harem could run into hundreds.⁹

Although noble women, due to their high status, were superior to commoner males, oracle bones showed that males were favored over females. The birth of a boy was thought to be more auspicious than the birth of a girl. By the Zhou dynasty, gender roles were already defined as seen from a poem from the Book of Poetry:

‘So he bears a son, and
Puts him to sleep upon a bed,
Clothes him in robes
Gives him a jade scepter to play with.
Then he bears a daughter,
And puts her on the ground,
Clothes her in swaddling clothes,
Gives her a loom-whorl to play with.’¹⁰

The *Nüjie* or *Lessons for Daughters*, written by Ban Zhao (ca. 48-116), states that the birth of a child was to be reported to the ancestors and the child presented with objects showing its gender role. So gender differentiation was shown from the very moment of birth. A bow was hung on the left side of the door for a boy and a cloth on the right side for a girl. Infants were presented to the family at the third day after birth. The reason for the delay could have been to seeing if the child survived its first few days of life. It also gave the family time to decide whether it would ritually recognize the child’s existence—whether the child would be accepted into the family or should be exposed to the elements.¹¹

Analysis of the Images of Women from Textual Materials^{12,13}

Analysis of the book *Biographies of Women (Lienü Zhuan)*, written by Liu Xiang (77-6 B.C.E.), shows how women were viewed during the Han Dynasty. The writer purportedly wrote the book to show the emperor the difference between virtuous and evil women. The author used examples of biographies of women who lived during the Zhou Warring States Period.¹⁴ He divided the book into chapters showing seven categories of feminine behavior:

- (1) matronly deportment,
- (2) sagacious clarity,
- (3) benevolent wisdom,
- (4) chaste obedience,
- (5) pure righteousness,
- (6) rhetorical competence, and
- (7) depraved women.

Examples in this book showed that even up to Han times, women were valued not only for their purity, obedience and chastity but also for their intellectual skills, ethical judgment and rhetorical ability. These same values were esteemed in men and associated with sages, righteous ministers and wise rulers. Examples in the book showed that the women's virtues came from their justified use of political power. They were praised for intervening in official appointments, relations with other states and even in royal successions. They acted with considerable independence and success and were shown to be decisive. Their virtue was due to the way they thought, as well as their advice and their intellectual skills.

To teach the emperors to beware of depraved women, there was a chapter focusing on the ending of the two dynasties, Xia and Shang, in which the women were blamed for the conduct of the male rulers. The Xia was said to have ended because the concubine of the last ruler was beautiful in appearance but of little virtue. The ruler

amused her by building a lake of wine. He is said to have forced three hundred men to drink from it like cows. She would laugh when the men became drunk and drowned in the lake. When the ruler's loyal minister tried to admonish him, she is said to have ordered his death. The nobles finally revolted. The ruler's own soldiers defected and refused to defend him. The Mandate of Heaven (the right to rule granted by Heaven) was moved to the next dynasty, the Shang.

The Shang was also said to have ended as the last ruler built a hill of grain, a pond of wine, and a forest of hung meat. He made men and women pursue each other naked through this forest. He honored the men his consort praised and executed those she hated. He tortured those who tried to advise him. Finally, his followers refused to defend him and submitted to the ruler who overthrew him.

Examples in the book also showed that women, during pre-imperial times, had rights in the domestic, economic, political, and religious spheres. The author cites examples showing that the wife was frequently consulted by her husband on important business concerning him, their home, and even affairs of state. While most landowners were men, women received and owned property. They also received large financial gifts. In the religious area, women often offered sacrifices and explained divinations.¹⁵ The book showed that although women in pre-imperial times were subservient to men, within their own social class, they were able to act with considerable independence and success. They were consistently portrayed as decisive agents within their society. They were praised for not limiting themselves to female concerns and were compared to just ministers and filial princes who tried to admonish the rulers they served.¹⁶

The *Biographies of Women* was so respected that it became the earliest extant book used for the moral education of women for the next two millennia. It was used to mold women in the Confucian way of life. However, the content of the book changed over time. The earliest extant text of the *Biographies of Women* is from the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The role of women in the Ming Dynasty

(1368-1644) text was reduced from that in the Song text. The Ming versions changed the chapter organization, biographical content and tone. Illustrations were more prominent and some removed the use of virtue as the organizing principle and presented the content in a purely chronological order. Some organized the stories into the woman's life cycle as a girl, wife, and mother. Emphasis was shifted to deemphasize the importance of the intellectual stories and the representations of women as central to the rise and fall of dynasties disappeared.

The time difference between the Song text and that of the Ming was only about 100 years. The original Han text was written 1,000 years before the Song version. Given the differences between the Song and the Ming texts, we can assume that the original Han Dynasty text must have been different from that of the Song, and the original Han text might have valued women more than was recorded in the extant Song text.

Because the *Biographies of Women* was so popular, each subsequent dynastic history included a section on the biographies of virtuous women. The selection of virtues changed to reflect the values of the changing society. For example, one can discern how the attitude towards widows changed through time. The official histories from the Six Dynasties to the Tang and the Song included stories of notable women who endured hardship and committed suicide for a righteous cause. The section in the Song history included two suicides of widows following the death of their husbands. There was no biography of widows refusing to remarry. The section in the Yuan history listed forty-eight suicides of widows. The majority of persons selected for the Ming and Qing histories were those who committed suicide to uphold their chastity and fidelity. In fact, the four hundred women recorded in the *Biographies of Women* in the Ming official history were selected from among more than thirty-thousand model women mentioned in the Ming *Veritable Records shilu* and in local gazetteers of the time.¹⁷ These examples show how the value placed on the virtues of chastity and fidelity changed over time.

Conclusion

Archaeological findings and textual analysis show that the status of women changed through time in both religion and politics. These changes reflect the value society placed on the role of women. The most drastic change was to occur in later times when widows were expected to commit suicide to demonstrate their chastity and loyalty to their deceased husbands

Chapter Three

The Great Empresses of the Han

After China was centralized under the Qin Dynasty, the emperor was supreme. The wives of the emperors were no longer daughters of the kings of other states. Instead, the wives and concubines all came from families who were not as powerful. All power resided in the person of the emperor. Those who wanted to share in his power had to be close to him in order to influence him. Families were eager to marry their women to the emperor in order to gain access to his power. Realizing the danger of the influence of palace women and their relatives, the founding emperor of the Qin removed his mother from his palace in order not to be dominated by her.¹

Of all the dynasties, the Han Dynasty was the one in which palace women, especially the emperor's widow, and their relatives were able to exert the greatest amount of power. In theory, the emperor's widow, the Empress Dowager,² was to withdraw from court as demanded by the bureaucracy. In reality, many were able to continue to maintain their hand in government through their psychological advantage as the biological or titular mother or grandmother of the emperor. The empress dowager was able to place her male relatives in important civil or military posts. Her control in the selection of the bride for the position of the wife of the heir made it possible for her to control the future empress, her family and relatives. Should the emperor be indisposed or too young to rule, the eldest empress dowager would act as regent giving her the right to rule directly should she wish to do so.

During the Han Dynasty, the power of the maternal relatives was so great that one relative actually usurped the throne and declared a short-lived dynasty, the Xin Dynasty (9-23 C.E.). Subsequent dynasties learned lessons from history and tried different ways to curb the power of palace women and their relatives. One

dynasty went as far as to pass a law requiring the suicide of the mother of the heir to the throne. But even this method was not successful as foster mothers, who had established close ties to the succeeding emperors, were able to exercise power either through the emperor or by ruling in his name with the help of their relatives and allies.³

The Legacy of Empress Dowager Lü⁴

The tradition of powerful empress dowagers began soon after the founding of the Han with Empress Dowager Lü. While the founding emperor was away battling the yet to be pacified areas, his empress stayed at the capital and was responsible for the capital and for key decisions in the home territories. Lü proved to be an able administrator and quickly built a strong working relationship with the officials. She was admired for her capability and feared for her ruthlessness. She seized power immediately after the death of her husband.

As regent for her young son, Huidi (r.195-188 B.C.E.), she ruled and controlled the government. Her son was terrified of her as she had made him watch the torture of his father's favorite concubine. Her limbs were cut off, her eyes gouged out, and her ears burned so that she was deaf. Poison was poured down her mouth to destroy her vocal cords. Lü killed the concubine's son and imprisoned her two daughters. She killed another of her husband's sons whom she felt had slighted his wife, who was Lü's niece. To consolidate her power, she made the male members of the imperial family marry women from the Lü clan. To prevent another family from having entry to power, she made her son marry the daughter of his biological sister. This violated the Chinese tradition of cross-generational marriage. Unfortunately, her granddaughter was not able to give birth to an heir. It was alleged that Lü told her to take eight boys from the other concubines, execute their mothers and adopt the children as her own.

As empress dowager and regent, Lü refused to give up power when her son came of age. After the death of her son, two of his children, her grandchildren, were consecutively installed as emperors. They were her puppets while she ruled as their regent. She ruled for sixteen years from 195-180 B.C.E. During her regency, members of her clan gradually took over important positions in government. She also issued an edict appointing two members of her family to the most

senior posts, the Chancellor and the General of the Army. After her death, three of the founder's descendants were able to muster the support of other imperial relatives. The joint forces marched on the capital. The young grandson was killed and the Lü family was exterminated.

Empress Dowager Lü has been criticized by historians as a ruthless and power-hungry woman. But, despite her reputation for ruthlessness and cruelty, she appeared to be genuinely devoted to her husband and to the safety of the empire. Long after the death of the founding emperor, she continued to carry out his instructions on safety of the empire and on the succession of ministers. Other than instances of giving positions to her relatives, she promoted capable officials. She must have thought herself a more capable ruler than her son, her grandsons, and the civil officials. She would not give up her power but instead governed until her own death.

During Lü's regency, she established good relations with the neighboring peoples and abolished the harsh policies established by the previous dynasty. She reduced taxes, *corevée*⁵ labor, and exempted those over seventy and under ten *sui* from physical punishment if they were found guilty of a crime. These actions and policies enabled the people of the empire to enjoy a measure of rest from the turmoil of the destruction of the previous Qin Dynasty. According to the historian, Sima Qian, the Empress Dowager was a good ruler and deserved to be known as a great stateswoman. He entitled his chapter, covering her period of rule, as the 'Basic Annals of Empress Dowager Lü.' She is the only regent to have her rule officially recognized in history.^{6,7}

Grand Empress Dowager Shangguan⁸

Not all Han Dynasty regents were powerful. Some were controlled by their relatives. For example, the young Empress Dowager Shangguan (c. 89 B.C.E.-37 B.C.E.), wife of Emperor Zhao (r. 87-74 B.C.E), was under the control of the regent who was her maternal grandfather. Her husband was the youngest son of the seventh emperor, Wudi (r. 141-7 B.C.E.). He succeeded to the throne when he was only eight *sui*. His father had appointed three persons as regents. One of the three soon died soon after his appointment. The remaining two were her grandfathers—her paternal grandfather, Shanguan Jie (d.80 B.C.E.), and her maternal grandfather, Huo Guang (d.68 B.C.E.). Shanguan resented Huo Guang's power, but the young emperor sided with Huo Guang. Shangguan lost in the power struggle and was killed along with the entire Shangguan clan in 80 B.C.E. Huo Guang, as the sole regent, dominated the government.

The young Emperor Zhao died after reigning for 13 years and Empress Shangguan became empress dowager at the age of fifteen. As Emperor Zhao left no issue, Huo Guang and the ministers had to decide on the succession. Huo considered Zhaodi's older brothers to be incompetent and unfit for the throne. Instead, he chose a nephew of Wudi (a son of Wudi's brother) as successor. The young man was probably chosen as his father was no longer living and so would not bring powerful relatives to the court. He never dreamt of ever being becoming emperor. Once he was installed, he began to spend incessantly and celebrated his good fortune during Zhaodi's mourning period. His behavior was unacceptable to the court.

Huo Guang convened a group of ranking officials and asked his granddaughter, the young Empress Dowager Shangguan, to dethrone the young man after he had been on the throne for only twenty-seven days—an unprecedented event in Chinese history. The impeachment listed 1,127 instances of misconduct that he was alleged to have committed during his short reign as emperor. The offenses during the mourning period fell into the following categories:

- Refusal to abstain from meat and sex;
- Failure to keep the imperial safe secure;
- Improperly promoting and rewarding his previous subordinates;
- Engaging in feasts and games;
- Offering sacrifices to his own father.

Empress Dowager Shangguan approved the articles of impeachment and ordered dethronement. The young man was transported, under heavy guard, back to his former principality. Her maternal grandfather then chose the commoner grandson of the former Crown Prince (who had been deposed along with his mother by Wudi) as the new emperor, Xuandi (r.74-49 B.C.E.).

Empress Dowager Shangguan, at the age of fifteen *sui*, was probably the earliest example of an empress dowager issuing decrees of dethronement and enthronement. These actions set the precedent giving later empress dowagers the power to do so. She was the youngest person in history to assume both the titles of Empress Dowager and Grand Empress Dowager. She was also a key figure in a number of political incidents during the middle Han Dynasty. The young woman lived at a time of power struggles. Her paternal grandfather had been killed during the power struggle between her paternal and maternal grandfathers. Her maternal grandfather's clan was killed after the death of Huo Guang when they planned a rebellion. Both sides of her paternal and maternal families were wiped out in separate mass executions during her time as Empress Dowager and Grand Empress Dowager.

Marriage Policy

Marriage policy during the dynasty changed according to the circumstances. At the early part of the dynasty, the founder was a commoner whose consorts were also commoners. The early emperors often took entertainers as consorts. These women later became empresses. Court officials were not happy that many women were promoted because they had the favor of the emperor and not on the basis of their virtue or family backgrounds. The officials wrote memorials condemning women of low status being named Empress. They said that ‘the empress is the mother of the country’ and that only daughters of princes and nobles, possessing territory, were worthy to wed a ruler and be named Empress.

By the time Wudi came to the throne in 141 B.C.E. the dynasty had been in place for sixty-one years. While the imperial family and their relatives had come from humble backgrounds, their families and friends were now members of the establishment. Their daughters were young aristocratic women that were suitable candidates as empresses. But these empresses, from aristocratic backgrounds, were chosen by the previous emperor and empress and were often not favored by their husbands. When their husbands succeeded to the throne, these women were often deposed. The position of empress would then be given to the favorite consort of the emperor. The new empress was often of commoner or entertainer backgrounds. Wudi’s marriages are examples of such occurrences. His first empress was chosen by his grandmother. The young woman, Lady Chen Jiao (b.c. 160 B.C.E.), was the daughter of Wudi’s father’s sister—his cousin. She was of imperial blood and met the expectations of the officials. Unfortunately, Chen lost Wudi’s favor. Nor did she give birth to a son. She was accused of sorcery and degraded after the grandmother’s death.⁹ After a former singing girl, Wei (c. 153-91 B.C.E.), gave birth to a son, Wudi named her his empress and her son as heir.

Empresses and Power during the Early Han

Dou Yifang (d.134 B.C.E.), the empress of the fifth emperor, Wendi¹⁰ (202-157 B.C.E.), was of humble birth. She had entered the palace as a low ranking palace woman. She and four other women were sent to serve Prince Liu Heng who was selected by the officials to succeed to the throne as the emperor Wendi. When her son succeeded as emperor Jingdi (r.157-141 B.C.E.) at the age of thirty-two,¹¹ Dou was named empress dowager. Despite her humble background she became very powerful. Her parents were given titles and her brothers and all her male relatives were allowed to move to the capital. Her son tried to please her. She was a devoted Daoist and her grandson, Wudi, was not able to promote Confucianism as the state doctrine until after her death. Although Dou wielded considerable power, she did not abuse it. She did not usurp power, nor did she try to impose heavy taxes or conscript labor.

Jingdi's empress was selected for him by his paternal grandmother, Grand Empress Dowager Bo Ji, who was the senior widow. The Bo family was not powerful. But Bo was able to force her grandson to marry her own grandniece even though he did not want her. The young empress, Lady Bo Xiao Jing (d.147 B.C.E.) did not produce any children. When the Grand Empress Dowager Bo passed away, the young Empress Bo had no support. Within four years she was deposed for being barren. She died in melancholy four years later.¹²

Jingdi's second empress, Lady Wang (d.126 B.C.E.), was from an obscure background and had been married before. She had given birth to a daughter. Wang's mother was the granddaughter of the late king of Yan but the family had fallen into hard times through the changes of dynasties. However, she was never reconciled to her new position in life. When a fortune-teller told her that her daughters would be rich and famous, she went to Lady Wang's husband's family and demanded that the marriage be annulled and that her daughter be returned. When the family refused, she kidnapped her daughter and

smuggled her into the palace of the heir-apparent. The young woman became one of his favorite consorts and her son, Wudi, was named heir after much palace intrigue.¹³ Wudi was one of the greatest of Han emperors. He neutralized the Xiongnu along the northern borders and expanded the dynasty to twice its former size, surpassing in size the contemporary Roman Empire.

Despite the fact that these women came from commoner backgrounds, once they became empress or empress dowager they gained a degree of power. When Wudi ascended the throne, his mother, Empress Dowager Wang was involved in court affairs wielding considerable authority although she was now quite old. Her deceased father had received posthumous honors and titles and her brothers were given high positions. When Wudi found out that his mother had a daughter by a previous marriage, he gave his half-sister a title and showered her with gifts.

Wudi had three empresses. He had deposed the first, Chen, chosen by his grandmother. His second, Empress Wei Zifu (c.153-91 B.C.E.) was of entertainer background. As empress, her son was named heir to the throne. Palace intrigue led to the accusation of sorcery against both of Wei's daughters, who were put to death. The empress and her son, the heir-apparent, were also accused. The heir then sent troops to kill the accuser—Wudi considered this to be a rebellion and the heir was forced to hang himself. Empress Wei was deposed and committed suicide. The youngest son of Wudi was named heir. Wudi tried to put an end to consort power by forcing the mother of the heir to commit suicide.¹⁴ He chose three ministers of the outer court to act as regents after his death; two of the appointed regents were connected by marriage and they selected their mutual granddaughter, a child of six, Lady Shangguan, to be the wife and empress to the young ruler, Zhaodi. This arrangement initiated a 20 year period (87-66 B.C.E.) of complete subordination for both the bureaucracy and the throne to consort families, especially that of Huo Guang.¹⁵

Zhaodi's successor, Xuandi, the son of Wudi's deposed heir and the grandson of former Empress Wei, had been orphaned and was brought up as a commoner by a prison official and later by the Chief Eunuch who arranged for his marriage to the daughter of another man who had been punished by castration. When the young commoner was selected to ascend the throne it was proposed that he take as empress a woman from a good background such as the youngest daughter of Huo Guang. The young emperor, however, felt that his wife Xu Pingjun, (d.c.70 B.C.E.), the mother of his son, had suffered with him through poverty and should have the position. The officials demurred and Xu was made Empress. Huo Guang's wife was not happy with the decision as she had wanted her daughter to be empress and purportedly told the female palace doctor that it was easy to poison a woman in childbirth. As soon as Xu's second son was delivered, poison was administered and the young empress died after holding the position for only three years.¹⁶

After her death, the youngest daughter of Huo Guang, Huo Chengjun (d.54 B.C.E.), was admitted to the palace and since she was the original choice of the ministers to become Empress, Xuandi agreed to the arrangement. She was named Empress in 70 B.C.E. but her powerful father died three years later. Soon after Huo Guang's demise, Xuandi named Xu's son as heir-apparent and this angered Huo Guang's wife who said that since the young man was the son of a commoner he was not entitled to succeed to the throne. She also believed that her daughter would be able to give birth in the future and so told the daughter to poison the heir. The plan was not successful as the young heir had food tasters. Soon afterwards it was discovered that Empress Xu had also been poisoned. Huo Guang's family now feared retaliation and so planned to rebel and depose the emperor, but their plan was discovered and all were sentenced to death. The young empress was accused of being evil and deposed. She killed herself after having been empress for only five years.¹⁷

Xuandi decided to select Lady Wang¹⁸ (d.16 B.C.E.) as his third empress as she was childless. Lady Wang was from a prominent

family. Her grandfather had been in the service of the founding emperor and had been rewarded with a title and land. Her father had also been friendly with Xuandi before he became emperor and she had been summoned into the palace when Xuandi ascended to the throne. While she had not gained the emperor's favor she had been given the upbringing of the heir, whom she cared for well. She died when she was over seventy. By that time, she had lived through the reigns of four emperors. She did not appear to have exercised any power or political influence even though she had held the title of Empress, Empress Dowager, and Grand Empress Dowager to three successive emperors. However, she was well loved and respected. While other women may have risen from having given birth to children, Empress Wang retained her position even though she did not have any biological children.

When the heir, the future Yuandi (r. 49-33 B.C.E.), was grieving over the death of his favorite consort, Empress Dowager Wang gave him her most beautiful lady-in-waiting, Wang Zhengjun (71 B.C.E.-13 C.E.), to console him. This young Lady of the same surname was not related to the empress dowager. Zhengjun's father only held a low government position but her mother was very ambitious and had made sure that the daughter grew up virtuous and educated in music and reading. The young Lady Wang had entered the palace at the age of eighteen as a low level palace woman with the title of Woman of the Household (*jiarenzi*). After she was given to the young heir, Wang became pregnant and gave birth to her only son, the future Chengdi (r. 32-37 B.C.E.). The grandfather, Xuandi, was delighted with his new grandson and named him the Great Successor. The father was not fond of his eldest son and wanted to name the son of another consort as his heir. But, he was not able to do so because of the affection his father had for the eldest grandson. When Yuandi ascended to the throne, Wang Zhengjun became empress.

Yuandi wanted to compensate his mother's family, the Xu family, for the poisoning of his mother. He arranged for the daughter of his mother's cousin, Lady Xu (d.10 B.C.E.), to marry his son, the

future Chengdi. The young Lady Xu was intelligent and had given birth to a son and a daughter but neither of them survived. Chengdi blamed his young empress for the lack of an heir when natural calamities occurred. He lost interest in her and became infatuated with Zhao Feiyan (43-1 B.C.E.) and her sister. The Zhao sisters had been slave entertainers in the palace of Chengdi's sister. Having gained the emperor's favor, the two sisters schemed to get rid of the young empress, accusing her and her family of witchcraft. Empress Xu was deposed and her family members were either killed or sent out of the capital. The deposed empress was later ordered to commit suicide by drinking poison. Zhao Feiyan was made empress.¹⁹ Neither of the Zhao sisters was able to conceive a child. When two baby boys were born to a slave girl and to a concubine, the Zhao sisters convinced the emperor to kill them; thus, when Chengdi died there was no heir.²⁰

Chengdi left court affairs to his mother, the Empress Dowager Wang Zhengjun, and her relatives as he was more interested in drinking and womanizing. Thus the Wang clan became very powerful. A nephew of Chengdi, aged twenty, succeeded him as Aidi (r.7-1 B.C.E.) and the then co-regents, Empress Dowager Wang and her nephew, Wang Mang (c. 45 B.C.E.-23 C.E.), stepped down. New maternal relatives from the Ai clan and Aidi's empress's family, the Fu clan, became influential. The court was split between many powerful factions—the Wang, (as Wang Zhengjun was still the Grand Empress Dowager), the Zhao (Empress Dowager Zhao Feiyan), and the maternal relatives of Aidi. However, the new emperor died after ruling for only six years and the Grand Empress Dowager Wang,²¹ being the senior widow, resumed power. She again named Wang Mang as regent for the new emperor who was only nine years old.

To consolidate his power and to prevent other families from becoming relatives of the new emperor, Wang Mang married his own daughter to the young emperor, Pingdi (r. 1 B.C.E.-5 C.E.), who unfortunately died five years later. Wang Mang chose another infant successor, Liu Ying (r. 6-9 C.E.), who had just been born the year

before, as emperor. Wang Mang continued to be regent with the title of Acting Emperor while convincing others that the Liu family no longer held the Mandate of Heaven. In January 9 C.E., he usurped the throne and declared a new Xin Dynasty (9-23). His reign was cut short when a distant descendant of the founding emperor rebelled and defeated him and re-established the Han Dynasty. The restored Han Dynasty is referred in history as the Later/Eastern Han.[22](#)

Maternal Relatives of the Later Han

The restored monarchy was never strong and needed the support of powerful allies to maintain the throne. The emperors, therefore, had to take wives from families of powerful lineages and so power often fell into the hands of imperial women and their relatives. Nine of thirteen emperors in the Later/Eastern Han were puppets. While the maternal relatives became powerful, their powers only lasted as long as they were able to have one of their female members married to the emperor. At times, the emperor would resent being a puppet of the maternal relatives and would go to the eunuchs for support to get rid of them. When this was successful, the eunuchs would be rewarded and they would become powerful and the officials would be resentful.²³

The founding emperor of the Later/Eastern Han, Guangwudi (r. 5-57), needed the support of strong families to restore and stabilize the dynasty. To have the support of the Northern gentry to gain the throne, he had married a woman named Guo (d. 52) and her son was named heir. Once Guangwudi had the throne, he no longer needed the support of the Northern gentry and those of the Nanyang area pressured him to change the empress and the heir. The emperor favored one of his imperial consorts, Yin (d.64), who was from Nanyang and so he deposed Guo. The former empress was sent to live in the Northern palace; Yin was named empress. Two years later, Guo's son was deposed and Yin's son was named heir and succeeded as emperor Mingdi (r. 58-75).²⁴

Mingdi's empress, Ma (d.79), was the daughter of a general. She had no children but her cousin, the daughter of her mother's sister, was also one of her husband's consorts. The latter's son was named heir. Empress Ma brought up the heir as her own son and he succeeded as emperor, Zhangdi (r.76-88). Zhangdi took two Dou²⁵ sisters into his harem and the elder became empress. However, neither of the two sisters had any sons and the son of a consort, a relative of Empress Ma, was named heir. But when Empress Dowager

Ma died, the fortunes of the Ma clan declined and that of the Dou clan became strong. Empress Dou (d.97) got rid of the heir, adopted another of Zhangdi's sons as her own, and he succeeded as Hedi (r. 89-105) with Dou as regent. She sent the emperor's biological mother, Lady Liang (d.c.83), to the prison hospital where she drank poison and died. The Dou clan, under her, became very powerful. After her death, the emperor's biological mother's clan, the Liang, was rehabilitated.

In the Former/Western Han (206 B.C.E.-9 C.E.), the humble social origins of most of the consorts meant that the women and their families could not be very powerful and so during that period only two Empress Dowagers attended court and controlled government. At that time, women provided an entry for their families into court and a way for them to rise as in the case of Wang Mang. The empresses of the Later/Eastern Han came from powerful families and so had great influence at court. Nine of the thirteen emperors were mere puppets as true authority was in the hands of imperial women and their relatives. Women became the way to increase and maintain a family's established position of prominence; yet the positions of the women and their families depended on the life span of the women and the family's ability to repeatedly marry its women to the emperors. During the Han, no single consort family was ever able to marry its relative into the imperial line for more than three generations. The most women a family ever married to Han emperors was five. When kinship ties to the ruling imperial family became weak, a consort family's fortunes collapsed and the empresses could be dismissed or forced to commit suicide.²⁶

During the Later Han, five clans—the Yin and Deng clans from Nanyang, the Ma, Dou and Liang clans from the northwest—were favored for long periods of intermarriage with the imperial family. Before 168, these five clans provided nine of the eleven empresses and five of the six regents. Four of these clans, Yin, Dou, Deng, and Liang provided two empresses each. One of the most powerful empress dowagers during that time was Deng Sui²⁷ (81-121), wife of Hedi.

Deng was Hedi's second empress but she was childless. When her husband died, he left behind two sons by unknown mothers. Deng picked the younger of the two, who was only 100 days old, as emperor; but the child died within months. She then chose a 12-year old as emperor, Andi (r.106-125). Deng continued to rule even after the emperor came of age for a total of sixteen years. She was considered, by some historians, to be the last effective ruler of the Later/Eastern Han. She was reputed to not tolerate corruption, even by her family members. She dealt with many problems along China's borders by the Xiongnu and the Qiang tribes. The famous female scholar, Ban Zhao (45-116 CE), was her advisor. After her death, Andi removed all Deng's relatives from power, forcing many of them to commit suicide. The emperor would later regret his actions, reverse his orders, and some of Deng's relatives were allowed to return.

None of the powerful clans survived until the end of the dynasty as they fell when the empresses lost favor or died. An example of the rise and fall of families can be seen in the case of the Liang family which rose when they helped Guangwudi conquer the Northwest and intermarried with his family. It fell when the head of the family was dismissed on charges of corruption, was jailed and executed. It recovered when a niece entered the harem of Zhangdi and gave birth to a son who became Emperor Hedi (r.89-105). After the Liang family was rehabilitated, they provided empresses for the succeeding emperors, Shundi (r.125-144) and Huandi (r. 146-168). After Huandi's empress died, the Liang family was not able to put another member into the palace as empress. The emperor turned to the eunuchs for support to drive the Liang family from power.[28](#)

An emperor grew up surrounded by eunuchs in the palace. They were his personal care-takers, advisors, and confidants. Several Han emperors used eunuchs to get rid of powerful maternal relatives. These eunuchs held power during the reigns as the emperors rewarded them with noble titles and important positions. For example, with the help of the eunuchs, Hedi stripped his uncle, the regent, Dou, of power and accused him of trying to murder the emperor. The regent committed suicide. Members of the Dou clan were either executed or exiled to Vietnam. The Empress Dowager Dou (d.97), wife of Zhangdi, was sent to live in the Southern Palace where she died a natural death.³⁰

Another emperor who gained his throne with the help of eunuchs was Shundi, the heir-apparent of Andi. When Andi passed away, his empress, Yan (c. 110-152), became regent. She was not from a powerful family nor was she the mother of the heir-apparent. In order to gain power, she had the heir's biological mother killed and demoted the heir. She chose another grandson of Zhangdi, a cousin of Andi, as emperor. Unfortunately, the young boy died soon after.³¹ A group of eunuchs freed the former heir, who was imprisoned in the Northern Palace in Luoyang, and proclaimed him Emperor. The Yan faction were executed or exiled to Vietnam. Empress Dowager Yan was demoted and sent to another palace where she died a natural death. The eunuchs were rewarded for their services.

So, when Emperor Huandi decided to get rid of the Liang faction, there had already been precedents of emperors turning to eunuchs for help. Huandi first identified the eunuchs the regent had used to spy on him and the ones he could trust. He sent over 1,000 men to surround the residence of the regent who was dismissed from his office and forced to commit suicide together with his wife. The regent's property was confiscated and the members of his faction rounded up and publicly executed. The Liang clan never recovered and Huandi governed without a regent.

When Huandi died, the Empress Dowager Dou Miao³² (d.172), named her father as regent. Since Huandi had no sons and had not named an heir, Dou chose a young boy, the great-great-grandson of Zhangdi, as Emperor Lingdi (r.168-189). The regent wanted to curb the power of the eunuchs and so allied himself with the students of the Academy and the grand tutor. They asked for the arrest of two eunuchs. The eunuchs saw the memorial, woke the boy emperor, assembled a force of guards and ordered the regent's arrest. The regent refused to surrender: he took several thousand men to the southern gate of the palace but did not attack. Within hours his men had slipped away and he had to kill himself. The regent's faction was put to death or exiled to Vietnam. The Empress Dowager survived and was sent to the Southern palace. The powerful eunuchs hated the Dou family and when the Empress Dowager Dou died, they placed her body on a wagon for transporting luggage and exposed it to the elements for a few days; they wanted to bury her as an imperial consort and not as an Empress. But, Lingdi disagreed. He insisted that she be buried as an empress dowager, and interned with her husband.

Lingdi depended on the eunuchs who might have chosen his two empresses. The first, Song (d.178), was from a distinguished family, but not a powerful one. The second, He (d.189), was the mother of his first son. She was from a family of butchers. When another son was born to the emperor in the same year, she felt threatened and poisoned the mother but could not touch the child as he was being fostered by the mother of the emperor. When the emperor wanted to depose her, the eunuchs dissuaded him. Lingdi could not decide which son to name as his successor but in the ensuing power struggle, the eunuchs' faction won and Empress He's son was named the successor and became Emperor Shaodi (r.189), at the age of 13 *sui*. The officials were very angry at the power of the eunuchs and the half-brother of Empress He urged her to get rid of them. She refused as the eunuchs had supported her. When he again went to see her, the eunuchs murdered him.

The dominance of the eunuchs led to the downfall of the Han dynasty. Three powerful generals marched on the capital protesting eunuch power. They attacked the palace and burned it to smoke out the eunuchs. Two thousand eunuchs were killed. The chief eunuch escaped with the emperor and his half-brother but was caught at the Yellow River where he was drowned. The two young princes wandered the countryside and were found by one of the Han generals who forced the empress dowager to depose the young emperor and enthrone his half-brother Xiandi (r.189-220). The general then killed both the former young emperor and the empress dowager. Xiandi was persuaded by Cao Cao (155-220), a warlord and the penultimate Chancellor of the dynasty, to move his base to the territory under Cao's control. In so doing, Xiandi became the puppet of Cao Cao who named his own daughter as Empress in 215. Cao Cao never proclaimed himself as emperor. But his son Cao Pi (r. 220-226) forced Xiandi to abdicate the throne by giving his two daughters to Cao Pi in marriage as a symbol of the passing of the Mandate of Heaven from Han to Cao Pi's new dynasty, Wei (220—265).³³

Palace Women during the Han Dynasty

The means for women to attain power was different from that of the men as they were not allowed to serve in the external bureaucracy. Women could only achieve power through palace intrigue and so battled each other for the emperor's favor. Power came from having the emperor's favor and giving birth to sons. Rival consorts used slander, plot, and magic to fight each other for the attention of the emperor. Families of imperial consorts struggled for control of the government and any empress who was weak or vulnerable risked being accused of witchcraft. Two witch hunts were conducted during the reign of Wudi. Empress Chen, first wife of Wudi, was unable to produce a male heir and was accused of practicing black magic and deposed. Her successor, Empress Wei (c. 94 B.C.E.), gave birth to a son and three daughters and stayed powerful for thirty-eight years. But, as Wudi advanced in age he became paranoid about the possible use of witchcraft against him. A series of persecutions began. Large numbers of people, many of whom were high officials and their families, were accused of witchcraft and executed, usually together with their entire clans.³⁴

The Han Dynasty stands out as the longest period of female influence at the top of government. Women and their families risked themselves in power struggles to gain influence over the emperor. The wives of the rulers of the new centralized China obtained new roles. The wife of the emperor, the empress, became the mother of the nation and could rule during his illness and as regent after his death. As empress, she also ruled over the families of her birth; for example, Empress Wang (61-31 C.E.) forced her father to remarry her mother, Lady Li, whom he had divorced.³⁵ Women and their families achieved power despite the opposition of civil officials. Later dynasties learned from what happened during the Han Dynasty and tried different ways to curb female power.

Conclusion

Chinese in imperial times regarded history as a mirror. Once an heir is designated, he is assigned learned scholars as his tutors. History was an important subject. The emperor was to learn what to emulate and what to avoid by what happened in historical times. The power of palace women and their relatives in Han times that led to usurpation was feared, and policies were developed to prevent this from occurring. However, the emperor needed allies and the fear of paternal relatives made them turn to maternal relatives. The same is true for preventing eunuch power. When maternal relatives became too powerful, the emperor had no choice but to turn to eunuchs for support. The history of the Han dynasty, the power of Empress Dowager Lü, the usurpation of Wang Mang, and the end of the dynasty due to eunuch power, were important lessons for later dynasties.

Chapter Four

The Great Non-Han Empresses of Early Medieval China

The term 'early medieval China' or 'medieval China,' has been used by other historians to designate the period of history from the unification of Northern China under the Northern Wei (386-535) Dynasty in 386 to the end of the Sui Dynasty when all China was under non-Han rule.¹ Non-Han dynasties also feared the power of palace women and maternal relatives. The Tuoba clan of the Xianbei of the Northern Wei Dynasty preferred naming women from the royal families of recently conquered states as empresses. These women did not have influential relatives at court since most of their family members had died defending their states against the conquering armies of the Northern Wei. In so doing, the court also consolidated their conquests and captured the loyalty of recently conquered people by naming their princess as the empress of the conqueror. Fear of maternal relatives accruing power also led to extreme practices. Six of the emperors did not name empresses though they might give the title posthumously. Barren women were named empresses. Mothers of eldest sons were never named empresses in their lifetimes. Instead, these women might be made to commit suicide after their sons were named heirs to the throne. Eldest sons were taken from their natural mothers and assigned to the care of a concubine with few influential relatives at court.²

Despite the efforts made to keep women and their relatives from power, the foster mothers, their relatives and allies became very powerful. Emperor Gaozong's foster mother, Chang, was a captive concubine from the Northern Yan who had been taken into the harem during the war with Northern Yan. Despite her supposedly weak status she was able to engineer the marriage of another woman from her defeated state to the heir-apparent. This woman became empress and empress dowager and ruled twice as regent by fostering the heirs to the throne.

Three imperial women wielded power during the rule of non-Han emperors—two in the Northern Wei and one in the Sui Dynasty. The two in the Northern Wei ruled as regents in the name of the emperor but were *de facto* rulers who consulted with the ministers and then made the decisions. Both ruled until their own deaths even after the emperors had come of age. The first Northern Wei regent, Feng³ (442-490), started out as a captive working in the palace of the Northern Wei. The second Northern Wei regent, Hu⁴ (c.490-528). was of Han origin and so was never made an empress during the lifetime of her husband. She became regent after his death, as she was the only imperial consort with a surviving son. Both women ruled twice as regent.

The empress of the Sui Dynasty, referred to as either Empress Dugu or by her posthumous name of Wenxian,⁵ did not rule as a regent as she predeceased her husband. She was said to have ruled jointly with her husband as the palace attendants called them ‘the two sage-emperors.’ The jealousy of the empress was said to have been responsible for succession problems and for the rise of the second emperor.

The Great Empresses of the Northern Wei

The first non-Han dynasty that was able to conquer all of the Sixteen Kingdoms and unify Northern China was the Tuoba clan of Xianbei origin. During this period of 249 years, there were two great female regents: Grand Empress Dowager Feng Wenming and Empress Dowager Hu Ling. Empress Feng is thought to be of mixed origin—Han and Xianbei—as one of her ancestors was ethnically Han. Empress Dowager Hu, on the other hand, was said to have been pure Han.

Grand Empress Dowager Feng

Grand Empress Feng Wenming's grandfather was Emperor Wentong (d.438), the last emperor of the Northern Yan (407-436) Dynasty. Her father had been executed and her uncle had sought refuge with the Rouran nomads. Her brother sought refuge with the Qiang tribes to the west while the young Lady Feng was brought to the Northern Wei palace as a servant. At that time, her aunt was an imperial consort of Emperor Taiwudi (r.424-452) and was able to protect the young Feng making sure she was educated in the Han tradition. At the age of 13, Feng was selected by another Northern Yan palace woman, Lady Chang (d.460), to be the legal consort of the heir. Chang was a concubine of Taiwudi and foster mother of the heir. When the heir ascended the throne as Wenchengdi (440-465), Feng was named empress.

Feng was only 23 when her husband died. Her step-son, Emperor Xianwendi (r.465-470), succeeded to the throne at the age of 11, and as the empress and titular mother, Feng was named Empress Dowager and co-regent. According to the law of the time, the young emperor's biological mother, a woman of Han ethnicity, had been ordered to commit suicide when her son was named heir-apparent.

When Wenchengdi died, there was a three-way struggle for power between Feng, the Tuoba elite, and a faction headed by the Chief Councilor. Feng won with the support of the Tuoba elite and

became sole regent. She was able to have the Chief Councilor executed and his supporters removed from key positions. She was sole regent for only a year as the emperor became of age and Feng was forced to retire. The emperor began to eliminate her supporters and executed her lover. To ensure the succession of his son, the emperor announced his retirement, and enthroned his son as Emperor Xiaowendi (r.471-499). The father retained the title of 'Retired Emperor' and continued to rule for four years when he suddenly died. Feng was suspected of having poisoned him.

Feng held on to power by fostering the heir-apparent, her titular grandson. She brought her nieces into his harem and her nephews into the palace as his companions. When her nephews were older she married them to Tuoba princesses. She now became regent for the second time as the young emperor was only eleven *sui*. The young man had been fostered by her and she had many years of control over him. Throughout his life, she tutored and at times physically punished him even when the emperor was an adult. During the remainder of her life, Feng was said to have been the *de facto* ruler and the emperor was only the titular ruler. She ruled for 11 years, until her death in 490. Some historical records appear to indicate that the emperor had started to participate in affairs of state before 486 and ruled independently from the time he was nineteen in 486.

During Feng's regency, she used different ways to maintain her position of power. She promoted well-respected and capable officials who were not members of her family. She shared the traditional positions for relatives between her only surviving brother, and family members of her patron, Lady Chang. She also forced the young emperor to implement the law on suicide of the mother of his eldest son and heir-apparent. After the death of the mother, Feng took in the young heir, her titular great grandson, the future Xuanwudi (r.500-5514), to foster.

Grand Empress Dowager Feng was said to have been responsible for trying to sinicize the Northern Wei and her grandson

continued the program after her death. Sinicization of the Northern Wei gave greater power to the central government and so decreased the power of the Tuoba tribal leaders. Bringing together the local populations into manageable administrative units made it easier for central government to impose and collect taxes. Before that, great tribal clans could attract large groups of independent households to work the land of the leaders in exchange for protection against heavy taxation. The program had many aspects:

1. Establishing an equitable field system which gave uncultivated land to individuals to bring those lands into the tax rolls: adult males were to receive 40 *mou* of open field (suitable for grain crops), adult females received 20 *mou*. Slaves or owners of slaves were given equal allotments. Allotments were also made for cattle—30 *mou* per head, up to four heads—on the assumption that more land could be worked with oxen plowing the land.
2. Reforming the officials' salaries system which benefitted most of the Han Chinese.
3. Banning the wearing of tribal clothes (494) and the use of native language at court for young officials (495).
4. Integrating the tribal and Han elites into a single ranking system (495) and abandoning the surname Tuoba replacing it with a Chinese one, Yuan (496).
5. Adopting Chinese surnames for all Tuoba clansmen and using Chinese language at court (about a decade later).
6. Moving the court to its new capital at Luoyang (494) resulting in impoverishing many tribal clans which had supplied the capital from the frontiers. The move to Luoyang had changed the relationship of the frontier troops to the dynasty. Previously the frontiers had been well supplied, their leaders had received favor at court, and the northern border had imperial attention. After the move, the view of the frontier was that of a marginal region; tribal troops were regarded as politically unreliable. Garrisons were cheated of their rations by corrupt officials who were assigned to frontier posts as a form of exile along with convicts sentenced to frontier service.⁶

The traditional Northern Wei policy of aggressive disruption of the Rouran Empire on the steppe was replaced by the Han conservative approach of walled defenses and tributary benefits. The tribal hierarchy reacted strongly to this radical shift away from Tuoba traditions. In 496, the crown prince, who did not like his father's sinicization policies, plotted with his followers to lead a large number

of tribes back to the former capital, Pingcheng, where he could hold the city against his father. Unfortunately for the crown prince, his plot was discovered and he was caned and deposed.

Xiaowendi was said to have been filial and obedient to his grandmother who had fostered him since birth. She asked him to build two tombs, one for herself and one for him, so they could be buried near each other. This was done but after her death, Xiaowendi ensured that he was not buried with her. Despite her death, he continued to be under her influence as his eldest son had been fostered by her, his ministers had been chosen by her, and his harem was filled with her nieces. The emperor's favorite consort, one of Feng's nieces had become ill and the Grand Empress Dowager Feng had sent her home. The niece later entered a nunnery.

After the mourning period of the death of the Grand Empress Dowager, the emperor named her youngest niece, Feng Qing, (c.490) as empress. Later, he recalled his favorite consort from the nunnery and had her brought to court. He favored her over Feng Qing whom he deposed and sent to the nunnery. The favored sister, Feng You⁷ (d.499), was then named empress. She did not have any sons and the son of another consort was named heir-apparent and Feng You was appointed his foster mother. On his deathbed, Emperor Xiaowendi ordered his empress to commit suicide.

Empress Dowager Hu Ling

The second powerful regent of the Northern Wei, Empress Dowager Hu Ling ruled twice as regent for her son, Emperor Xiaomingdi (r.515-528). Hu was of Han origin and was a secondary consort of Emperor Xuanwudi (483-515). Her father was a minister of education. Her aunt, a Buddhist nun, preached in the palaces. The aunt convinced the palace personnel of the beauty and good upbringing of Hu Ling who was then recruited into the palace. At that time, the emperor had no sons. None of the palace women wanted to give birth to sons as they were afraid of incurring the jealousy of the

official consort, Empress Gao (d.518), who was suspected of having murdered the emperor's first son and the former empress, Yu (d.507). Gao was from a very powerful family. Her aunt, the mother of Xuanwidi, had died the year her son had been named heir-apparent. Although none of the imperial consorts were willing to take the risk of giving birth to the heir, Lady Hu prayed for a son. She said that an heir was necessary and that one should not fear for one's life when the imperial line was in danger. In 510, she gave birth to a son, the future Xiaoming. The emperor was very happy and protected the son by having him raised by nursing mothers from good families in a separate palace. Lady Hu swore that he would be made heir-apparent and her hopes were realized two years later.

Emperor Xuanwu suddenly died in 515 and Lady Hu's son Xiaoming was enthroned at the age of five. Empress Gao was named Empress Dowager and Lady Hu was named Imperial Mother. The day after the enthronement, Lady Gao's uncle was murdered as it was feared that he would become too powerful now that his niece was the Empress Dowager. Lady Gao now feared that she might be demoted and tried unsuccessfully to murder Lady Hu who was protected for five months by the group that murdered Gao's uncle. Eventually, Lady Gao was deposed, sent to a nunnery and soon died under suspicious circumstances. Lady Hu was named Empress Dowager and regent for her five-year old son.

Empress Dowager Hu inherited serious economic and social problems as most of the best land in the north and north-west had been made into imperial pasture lands. In addition, there was abuse of economic privileges by the gentry's families in the northeast. She also had to deal with cultural and racial tensions between the Han and the non-Han tribal leaders. She worked with the group that had protected her. She carried on imperial sacrifices in place of her son, issued edicts, competed in archery contests with her officials, travelled around the countryside to receive petitions, personally interviewed new candidates for office and took frequent pleasure trips to sacred and scenic spots. It was said that her son began participating in policy

discussions when he was eight years old and by the time he was ten there was widespread dissatisfaction with her rule. In writing of this period, her official biography began to picture her as the 'Last Bad Ruler' of the Northern Wei emphasizing her immorality, lack of personal restraint, neglect of governmental affairs and of her lovers. Her brother-in-law, Tuoba Cha, also known as Yuan Cha (d.525), then conspired with a eunuch to remove her from power and become regent in her place. Hu was placed under house arrest and was forced to retire from her regency. With her retirement, all those who had benefitted during her regency lost their positions.

Within less than five years, the officials and imperial princes were unhappy with Tuoba Cha and appealed to the young emperor to remove him from office, but the young emperor did not take any action. Many of the unhappy individuals turned to Hu for help but she was officially not allowed to see her son. She asked to see her son under the pretext of getting his permission to enter a nunnery. During the meeting they reconciled and plotted to strip Tuoba Cha of his power. Tuoba Cha was ordered to commit suicide. Instead of handing authority back to her 15 year-old son, Hu resumed her regency. By then all of North China was in open rebellion and the capable officials who had assisted her in her first regency had either died of old age or had been murdered. She appointed some ethnic Han officials whose policies turned out to be irresponsible and their ethnicity alienated the Tuoba. By 525, her son was old enough to rule but she refused to retire. Three years later, desperate about his mother's unwillingness to allow him to rule, the young emperor asked Erzhu Rong⁸ (d.530), the Xiongnu leader in Shansi, to free him from his mother's Chinese advisors. When this was known, the Chinese advisors had the emperor murdered and the Empress Dowager first placed the emperor's infant daughter on the throne, but this was unacceptable, so she placed a two-year old grandson of Emperor Xiaowen on the throne. Erzhu Rong did not accept this. Instead, he placed his own protégé, Tuoba Ziyu, a grandson of Xianwen (r.465-471) on the throne and married him to Erzhu's daughter. She was named empress. The following day, the gates of the capital were opened from the inside by relatives of the

Empress Dowager's own favorites. Two days later, Erzhu Rong's troops drowned Hu and 2,000 officials and their families, most of whom were Chinese.

The Sage Empress of the Sui Dynasty

Empress Wenxian (544-602) was married at the age of 14 to Yang Jian, the founder of the Sui Dynasty. The founding empress was from a powerful Xianbei clan that remained powerful from the fourth to the eighth centuries. Her father was Dugu Xin (d.557) who had served the Northern Wei, the Western Wei, and the Northern Zhou. Her family had intermarried with the great families of Northern Wei for centuries. Her sister was the wife of Emperor Ming (534-560) of the Northern Zhou. Her mother was Han Chinese, and her daughter was the principal empress of the Northern Zhou emperor, Xuandi. When Xuandi tired of his empress—Wenxian's daughter—and ordered her to commit suicide, Wenxian went on her knees to beg for her daughter's life. She admitted to all and any wrongdoings of the Yang family and knocked her forehead on the ground until it bled. The suicide order was rescinded. But the emperor was angry and was determined to exterminate the entire Yang family.

Wenxian and Yang Jian had a happy marriage. He promised her that he would never have children with his other wives. Empress Wenxian was literate and cultivated. She was said to have been very humble but had strong political instincts. When her husband founded a new dynasty there was a lot of work to be done. She would ride with him in the carriage to the audience hall and wait in a side room while her eunuchs would be inside the hall observing and reporting to her. When she disagreed with her husband's policy decisions she would admonish him and have it rectified. When the audience was over they would return to the palace to eat and rest. They often discussed political issues and problems and it is said that they would smile whenever their eyes met. Her biography in the official history of the Sui says: "Whenever the empress discussed politics with the emperor, their ideas frequently coincided." People in the palace nicknamed

them as ‘the two emperors.’ The emperor was said to be very fond of her, and yet, a little afraid of her.

She was praised as she admonished her daughters not to be like the princesses of the Northern Zhou and to treat their in-laws with propriety. One of her cousins killed seven young women and her husband wanted to treat him leniently as he was related to her. But she said that personal considerations should not interfere with state matters and the cousin was put to death as decreed by law. On the other hand she interfered with the sentencing of her half-brother who practiced witchcraft with the intent to harm her. His sentence was reduced to life instead of death as she said that he did not harm her and not the people. She was a modest and frugal woman and worked hard with her husband to govern the country well. She helped her husband start a trend of non-corruption of politics and positively influenced the economic recovery and development that marked the beginning of the Sui Dynasty.

She was a fervent Buddhist and made sure the imperial princes were taught Buddhism; as the imperial couple grew older their Buddhist observances grew more frequent and more elaborate. However, when one of her sons wanted to become a Buddhist priest he was denied permission. History considered her to be a good empress but also criticized her in two areas. The first was that she was very jealous and held her husband to his promise to be faithful to her thus restricting the access of other women to him. As she grew older she became more jealous and whenever the concubine of a prince or of a minister became pregnant she would urge her husband to dismiss the person. When she was about 50 years of age, her husband was attracted to the charms of the grand-daughter of an old rival and she secretly had the girl killed. When he found out, he was furious but they made up. The second area that the historians blamed her for was the change in succession from the eldest to the second son.

This was also an outgrowth of her jealousy. She had begun to pry into the lives and sexual habits of her sons. In 600, she was very

angry with the heir-apparent who was infatuated with his favorite concubine. At the same time, his principal consort, chosen by his parents, had suddenly died under mysterious circumstances. On finding out about her anger at the heir-apparent, her second son, Yang Guang (r.604-17), saw it as an opportunity to plot his brother's downfall and take his place as the heir. Yang Guang and his followers made up evidence to mislead the suspicious emperor who then deposed the heir and named the second son as heir.

After the death of Empress Wenxian, the emperor no longer had a partner in performing his imperial duties. He lost interest in governing and gradually handed over the management of state affairs to the new heir.

Conclusion

The biographies of the non-Han empresses show that palace women could assume power should the emperor be too young to rule as in the cases of Feng and Hu. Feng was a good ruler and the officials tolerated and may even have preferred her governance. Hu's biography shows that having power and keeping it are very different. As the mother of the emperor, she had access to power and so was able to become regent. When she did not prove to be a good ruler she was removed from power. Yet, when the court needed change they had to turn to her as the empress dowager was the one who had legitimate access to power. Empress Wenxian's route to power was different. She was never a regent as her husband outlived her. She gained power as she had both the love and respect of her husband.

Part II

618 C.E.-960 C.E.

Chapter Five

The Great Tang Dynasty To The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (618-960)

The Tang Dynasty is regarded as a high point in Chinese civilization—equal to or surpassing that of the Han. With its large population base, the dynasty was able to raise professional, as well as conscripted, armies of hundreds of thousands of troops to acquire territory through military campaigns.¹ Tang Taizong (r.626-649) said that he loved both the Chinese and the barbarians (nomads outside of China's borders). Members of minorities and foreigners were accepted into Tang society and rose to high positions in government. The early Tang was a period of progress and stability. The usurper, Empress Wu Zetian (624-705), was a good regent and a good female emperor. The dynasty reached its height during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (r.712-756). Towards the end of his reign, the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763) tore the country apart. When the dynasty was restored, central power was very weak. Although the dynasty lasted another one hundred and fifty-one years, power was in the hands of different military generals. Towards the end of the dynasty, one of the military governors deposed the last emperor of the Tang (907) and established the Later Liang Dynasty (907-923). Thus, began a new period of fragmentation that is referred to in history as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-960/979).

The five dynasties in the north were short-lived with different groups fighting and quickly succeeding each other through conquests and intrigues. Ten different ethnic Han kingdoms fought for supremacy in the south. An ethnic Han general, in the last of the five dynasties, usurped the throne, conquered most of the kingdoms in the south, and established the Song Dynasty (960-1279). In time, Song was able to conquer and unite all of the kingdoms in the south. However, she was never able to conquer all of the territories in the north despite many attempts to do so. Therefore, Song co-existed with non-Han states. There were the Xi Xia or the Western Xia

(1038-1227), a Tangut Empire, in the west and the Liao (907-1125), a Qidan Empire, in the north. In 1125, Song acquired a new neighbor in the north when the Jurchen conquered the Liao and established a new dynasty, the Jin (Gold) Dynasty. The Jurchen tried to conquer the Song but only succeeded in chasing the ethnic Han dynasty to the south. In time, the Mongols conquered the Xi Xia, then the Jin (Gold), and lastly the Song and established the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). China was again united under non-Han rulers.

The Founding of the Tang

Li Yuan (r.618–626), the Duke of Tang, was a favorite of the founder of the Sui Dynasty and had a distinguished career in his service to the dynasty. His family was related to the imperial families of both the Northern Zhou and the Sui. His maternal grandfather's eldest daughter was married to Emperor Mingdi (r.557-61) of the Northern Zhou and his seventh daughter was Empress Wenxian of the Sui. His fourth daughter was the mother of Li Yuan.

The Li clan's ancestors may have been Xianbei but they had intermarried with other non-Han tribal aristocracies. Li Yuan also had Turkish blood as his maternal grandfather was a member of a very prominent Turkish clan. Li Yuan's mother and Empress Wenxian were sisters and so he and the second emperor of the Sui were first cousins. But, when the Sui began to fall apart from local rebellions, Li Yuan, one of the most powerful of Sui generals, ordered his sons to raise troops. In 617, he rose in opposition to the Sui Dynasty. His sons fought with him to overthrow the Sui and so did his daughter, Princess Pingyang (c.600-623). In 619, his armies took the capital and six months later he founded a new dynasty, the Tang.²[\[View Map\]](#)³

Succession Problems

The second emperor of the Tang, Li Shimin (r.599–649), was not the eldest son and so was not the heir to the throne. He was ambitious and thought that he should have been made heir as he felt he had made the greatest contribution in helping his father conquer the empire. To realize his ambition, he conspired against his elder brother and other siblings. He accused his brothers of having illicit relations with members of the imperial harem. When his brothers learned of this they went to speak to the emperor. On entering the main palace, they were attacked and killed by Li Shimin's men. Their heads were shown to the brothers' followers who became afraid and surrendered. Li Shimin then marched, fully armed, to see his father who was intimidated and named him the heir and successor to the throne. Not long after being named heir, Li Shimin forced his father into retirement and became Emperor Taizong at the age of twenty-six. His long reign of twenty-three years assured stability and prosperity to the early Tang.

Taizong named the eldest son of his empress as heir. To ensure that his son would not plot against him, as he had against his own father and brothers, Taizong executed those close to the heir. This had the opposite effect, as the heir became alarmed and plotted the removal of his father. When the plot was discovered the emperor degraded the son to commoner status and imprisoned him. Taizong's favorite son hoped to replace his brother as heir. However, there was opposition to his appointment and another son, Li Zhi (628-683), was named heir as he had the support of the most influential ministers. A high powered group was named as his tutors. Taizong was not happy with the choice and wanted to replace him with a son whose mother had been the daughter of the second Sui emperor, Yangdi. His highest ranking ministers opposed this and so when Taizong died, Li Zhi became the third emperor, Gaozong (r.649-83).

Women in the Tang⁴

Tang women's Tartar blood and nomadic background meant that they had more freedom as they had to work hard to survive in the harsh environment in the north. The most powerful woman of the period was Wu Zetian, who ruled behind the scenes for many years, then usurped the throne and declared a new dynasty.⁵ However, even ordinary palace women could rise to power through their own ability and not through marital or sexual liaison nor family ties. One such person, described as the first woman Premier of China, was Shangguan Wan'er⁶ (664-710).

Shangguan Wan'er belonged to the same clan as Empress Shangguan, empress of Emperor Zhao of the Han Dynasty. This gifted palace woman was very active in court politics at the highest level. Her grandfather was a famous poet official, who served under both Taizong and Gaozong but had been executed for opposing Wu Zetian. Her father had been executed as well. She and her mother were placed into the palace as servants. Inside the palace, she was able to obtain an excellent education. At the age of fourteen, her intelligence and literary talent caught the attention of Empress Wu Zetian. Throughout her rule, she depended on this talented young woman to draft all the state documents. Shangguan was able to have the confidence of royal personages of different factions, such as Empress Wei (c.665-710) as well as Princess Taiping (d.713). In addition to drafting documents, Shangguan also wrote poems on behalf of members of the imperial family. She was able to encourage the appointment of officials with academic credentials and even served as judge for civil service examinations and poetry competitions. She was executed during the coup to get rid of Empress Wei and her faction.

Tang Princesses

Tang princesses were arrogant and showed little regard for chastity. The gentry did not want to intermarry with the imperial family as they made poor Confucian wives. Royal wives looked down on their husbands and openly had affairs. Many kept several lovers or male concubines. Some were very powerful and were involved in politics. Many had their own official administrations with positions sold to merchants and butchers so that these families could have official titles. Others suffered because of politics involving their fathers. Princesses in the later Tang were not as powerful and were used for marriage alliances. These unfortunate women lived their lives among foreigners following what they considered to be 'barbarian' customs.^{7,8}

Other princesses become nuns. Daoist nuns were highly respected as they had the same standing as Daoist priests. Eleven of the two hundred and ten Tang princesses took their vows to become nuns in early adulthood. One was ordained in childhood but later chose to live as a lay person. Five others had been married but decided, in their later years, that they preferred to become nuns. With such imperial examples, many Tang women also chose to become Daoist nuns.⁹

Powerful Princesses

The most powerful princesses of the Tang were Pingyang, Taiping and Anle.

Princess Pingyang

Pingyang was the third daughter of the founding emperor, and played a prominent military role in helping her father overthrow the Sui and establish the Tang Dynasty. Her life and actions give us some understanding of the royal women of that era.¹⁰ These women had military training and could assume leadership roles. When Pingyang's father rebelled, she left the court, went to her family estate, and organized a 'Woman's Army.'¹¹ At that time, the people in the area

were experiencing a drought. The princess opened the estate's food stores to the people and so won them over. Many of them joined her army. Other rebel forces in the region also joined her when they heard of her father's victories. The more battles she won, the more that new armies were eager to fight under her banner. After each victory, her army would distribute food and so win over the people in the captured territories. The rural people saw her armies as liberators rather than as conquerors and supported them. When her army grew to 70,000 troops, the Sui army took her seriously and launched an attack against her but was defeated. She and her brother Li Shimin, the future second Tang emperor, together captured the Sui capital. When her father became emperor, she was made a marshal with the same entitlements as her brothers. But the hard struggles of war had worn her out and she died at the age of twenty-three *sui*. Her father ordered martial music played at her funeral. When the officials said that martial music was never played at the funerals of women, the emperor said that there was also no precedent of a princess leading troops to help establish the dynasty.¹²

Princess Taiping

Taiping,¹³ daughter of Gaozong and Wu Zetian, was the most powerful princess in Chinese history. She was politically active and had a great deal of influence over the Tang court. As a child, Taiping had become a Daoist nun to pray for her grandmother. She appears to have been a nun in name only and stayed within the palace. She remained a nun for a number of years to further avoid pressure for her hand from Tibet. In 618, she was married for the first time but her husband was killed in an uprising against her mother. She was then married to one of her mother's nephews. She excelled in politics and her mother was very fond of her and often involved her in discussions of court affairs. As her mother lay dying, Taiping and her nephew, the future Xuanzong (r.712-756), entered her mother's palace and killed the mother's favorites who had dominated court affairs. Under duress, Wu Zetian agreed to the officials' request to yield the throne. Taiping's brother Zhongzong was restored to the throne after their

mother's death.

Zhongzong was grateful to his sister for her help and richly rewarded her. Princess Taiping's fief was increased to that of 5,000 households. She was privy to all the privileges enjoyed by their brother, the future Ruizong, including that of setting up her own office. She recommended officials to Zhongzong for important positions. She did not get along with Zhongzong's official consort, Empress Wei, who tried to remove Taiping from the political scene and so slandered her and her allies. When Zhongzong died of mysterious circumstances, Empress Wei and her daughter, Princess Anle, were thought to have poisoned him. Wei placed a teenaged son on the throne hoping to rule through him. She tried to murder Taiping and the future Xuanzong, son of Ruizong (r.684-690; r.710-712). The plot was discovered. Taiping and the future Xuanzong joined forces, attacked the palace and killed Empress Wei and her daughter, Anle. Taiping then dragged her nephew, the young teen-aged boy, from the throne and returned the throne to her brother, Ruizong.

Ruizong then became emperor for the second time (he had been removed from the throne by his mother the first time). He was grateful to his sister and increased her fief to 10,000 households. He respected her and heeded her advice. She began to again dominate the court. He consulted with her before making a final decision on most issues. Whenever she could not go to court, officials would go to her and ask for her advice. She would overturn cases decided by the judiciary; protected those of her faction; demoting or dismissing from their posts those who opposed her. Concerned about the threat posed by her nephew, the future Xuanzong, she plotted to remove him from his position.

Ruizong was persuaded by officials to send her and her husband away from the capital. While she was away, Ruizong gradually transferred his power to his son. The heir-apparent was aware of the danger posed by his aunt and recommended that his

older brother, preferred by Taiping, be named in his place but his father refused. He then asked that Taiping be recalled to the capital. When Taiping returned to the capital she started meddling in politics again. In 712, Ruizong abdicated in favor of his heir. Taiping then plotted a coup to remove Xuanzong but it was discovered. Her supporters were killed but she managed to escape. She was ordered to commit suicide. She was so rich that it took three years to document her properties, livestock, land, and warehouses full of goods after her death.

Princess Anle

Anle¹⁴ was the youngest daughter of Zhongzong and Empress Wei and was born while her parents were in exile for 14 years. In 698, her parents were recalled to the capital and her father was reinstated as the heir-apparent. Empress Wu tried to foster peaceful co-existence between her family (Wu) and the Tang imperial family (Li) and married Anle to one of Wu's grand-nephews. The young man's father, Wu Sansi was the lover of Anle's mother, Empress Wei. After her father ascended the throne Anle was given authority to set up her own office and retain her own staff. She was then able to sell official posts and titles, accept bribes and build herself a residence that outdid the imperial palaces.

Anle was clever and ambitious and was able to draft decrees for her father to sign without his reading the contents. She and her mother frequently slandered the appointed heir-apparent and tried unsuccessfully to persuade her father to appoint her in his place. Unable to bear this any longer, the heir-apparent rose in revolt, not against his father, but against Anle and her mother. As a result, Anle's husband and his father were killed but so was the heir-apparent. Anle then married her deceased husband's cousin with whom she was said to have been having an affair while her husband was still living. When Zhongzong died of poison, Anle and her mother were under suspicion. The two women tried to seize power through a puppet emperor but were killed in a coup staged by Princess Taiping and the future Xuanzong. Anle was posthumously stripped of her titles and

labeled a disobedient commoner.

The Less Fortunate Princesses

Some suffered because of politics involving their fathers. Princess Jinxian (d.732)¹⁵ was the ninth daughter of Ruizong and sister to Xuanzong. She and her sister, Princess Yuzhen¹⁶ (d.762 or 763), spent the first 15 years of their lives under house arrest and feared for their lives. Both chose to become Daoist nuns. They were the earliest Tang princesses to be ordained in 711. When their father was restored to power, he decreed that a temple be built for them in Chang'an but it was finished with their own funds. Although Yuzhen was a nun, she maintained a home near the temple and often went to ask her brother, Ruizong, for favors for her friends and relatives, including the reinstatement of the poet, Li Bai (701-762).

After Tang was weakened following the An Lushan Rebellion, princesses did not live luxurious lives. Princess Hezheng (740-780)¹⁷ was the daughter of Suzong (r.756-762) and his official empress. Her biological mother died when the young girl was three years of age. She was then raised by a concubine to whom she was devoted. During the An Lushan Rebellion, she left her children behind and fought with her husband in battles. She brought her widowed elder sister, Princess Ningguo (c.760), with them as they fled the rebels, giving her the only horse to ride while she walked. She was a woman of principles and provisioned armies out of her own funds.

Princess Hanyang (c.780-840)¹⁸ was the daughter of Emperor Shunzong (r.805) and Empress Wang. By that time, Tang was very weak. The princess was very frugal and saved paper by scratching on the wall with her hairpins. She left the palace shortly after her marriage and from then on only wore the clothes she had been given before leaving. Her grandnephew, Emperor Wenzong (r.827-840), was also frugal. He asked her when the clothes she wore had been in fashion. He also wanted to know why extravagance was in vogue. She explained that she had worn these clothes for 30 years. She said

that extravagance among the people began when the treasures of the palace were looted toward the end of Xuanzong's reign. These treasures were then owned by many of the common people who used them to show off their wealth and to compete against each other. Wenzong was very impressed and told all his palace women and princesses to model their clothes on what the Princess wore and decreed an enforcement against all extravagance and luxury.

The Heqin Princesses

The sending of princesses with a view of 'pacifying' the nomads had been traditional Chinese policy since Han times. It began as part of the *Heqin* system of marriage alliance which included the regular payment of gifts to the 'barbarian' rulers. While rulers of dynasties of Han origin did not use their daughters or sisters of the emperors for marriage alliances, non-Han rulers often intermarried with other groups for alliance purposes. One of the first such princess in the Tang was Princess Wencheng¹⁹ (d.680), a niece of the second emperor, Taizong. She was very young when she travelled on a year-long journey from Chang'an to Lhasa to marry one of the two great Tibetan kings, Songtsen Gampo (Wylie: *strong btsan sgam po*) (r.6-650). She was one of his five or six wives. After her arrival, the Tibetan aristocrats were said to have stopped tattooing their faces as it offended her. As a result of this marriage, Chinese scholars and texts were brought to Tibet and Tibetan students went to China for studies. She lived in Tibet for four decades, even after the death of her husband. Many legends grew up around her but not many can be authenticated.

Princess Jincheng²⁰ (c.699-740) was the great grand-daughter of Gaozong and Wu Zetian. Her grandfather was Wu's second son who was forced to commit suicide after being accused of plotting against his mother. His family was placed under house arrest and her father was repeatedly beaten. Tibet had negotiated for Princess Taiping as a bride but Jincheng was adopted as the daughter of the emperor and sent as a bride to Tibet (710). She was married to Mes

Ag Tshoms (Wylie: khri lde gtsug btsan) (r.704-755) and was one of several of his queens. She was literate and frequently wrote her first cousin, Xuanzong. She also played a significant role in stabilizing relations between Tibet and China, but her three decades in Tibet did not produce long periods of peace. She supported Buddhism in Tibet and built temples sheltering monks from persecution.

In 821, Princess Taihe, (c.843) a daughter of the late Emperor Xianzong, was given in marriage to the Uighurs. Two other princesses had been married to the Uighurs—Princess Ningguo (c.840) and Xianan (c.840). There was an elaborate ceremony installing Taihe as the wife of the Uighur leader, exchanging her Tang costume for that of the Uighur. She stayed with the Uighurs for 22 years and shared the tribulations of the disintegration of the Uighur Empire, facing the hardships of a refugee and a prisoner when the Uighur capital was taken by the Kirghiz. She was rescued by her husband's troops and was later freed by a Chinese detachment. In 843, she finally arrived in Chang'an where she was snubbed by the other imperial princesses and had to acknowledge the Uighur ungratefulness for China's kindnesses and for her lack of success in pacifying the foreigners. She had lived in an isolated country which was bleak and cold, within felt walls and woolen curtains. The meat and milk for drink were not palatable. The court had expected her to bring about a change in Uighur policies; yet she had no authority in the Chinese court and thus, no respect in the Uighur power structure. Her request for cattle and sheep to feed the famine-stricken Uighurs was not met by the Tang court.²¹

The End of the Tang

The Tang had a century of stability until the An Lushan rebellion (755-763). After the rebellion, the richest and most productive provinces were left devastated and depopulated. China had abandoned its territories in southern Manchuria; the entire modern Gansu had fallen to the Tibetans. The most important long-term damage was the loss of authority by the central government. The military governor system, originally set up to guard the frontiers, now had the power to maintain armies, collect taxes, and pass on their titles and power to their descendants. These new regional authorities did not establish separate kingdoms and remained within the framework of the Tang, but were semi-independent because of the breakdown of central power. As the central government weakened, the military governors became stronger. The court had to use palace armies, led by the eunuchs, in or near the capital for protection. The civil and military officials resented the growing power of the eunuchs. A century of struggle between the central government and the military governors led to another rebellion, the Huang Chao Rebellion (875-884). After this, there was continuous infighting among rival governors trying to establish their own dynasties. This period is referred to in history as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period [\[View Map\]](#)²² (907-960/979).

The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms

The Five Dynasties in the North succeeded each other. The south was divided into ten kingdoms which battled each other for supremacy. The northern dynasties periodically attempted to conquer the south but were not successful. Eventually, the founder of the Song Dynasty conquered all of the small kingdoms in the south except for one. This was later conquered by his brother, the second emperor of the Song.

The first dynasty, the Later Liang (907-923), and the last, the Later Zhou (951-960), were ruled by Han Chinese. Three of the others

—Later Tang (923-936), Later Jin²³ (935-947), and Later Han (947–951) were ruled by Shatuo Turks, a Turkic tribe that had resided near the Shatuo dessert. It was a time of war and the different dynasties were short-lived lasting between 4-16 years, an average of 10.6 years per dynasty. While the Five Dynasties was short-lived, it became the historical basis for the geopolitical landscape as China remained fragmented until the Mongol conquest.

The first of the Five Dynasties, the Later Liang (907-923: 16 years) was founded by a Han Chinese who had assassinated the Tang emperor in 904 and had ruled through a 13-year-old puppet. Three years later, he forced his puppet to abdicate and proclaimed the founding of the Later Liang Dynasty with himself as emperor. At that time, his strongest enemy was a Shatuo Turk Li Keyong (856-908) who used the slogan, ‘Restore the Tang.’ The Shatuo Turk clan had been awarded the imperial surname ‘Li’ by the Tang Dynasty and so they claimed they were part of the Tang family out to unify China. When victorious, Li’s son proclaimed himself emperor and founded the Later Tang (923-936: 13 years).

In 936, the son-in-law of the second Later Tang emperor rebelled with the help of the Qidan of Manchuria and established a new dynasty called the Later Jin (936-947: 11 years). Unfortunately, the Later Jin was dependent on the Qidan for support and had to swear allegiance to the Qidan ruler, Yelu Deguang (902-947), who had formed a state, north of China, in 907. In return for the Qidan assistance, the Later Jin ceded sixteen prefectures around present day Beijing to the Qidan. This was very unpopular and the governors of the states decided to rebel. At the same time, the Qidan began to see the Later Jin as their puppet state and tried to rule it directly (937). Rebellions arose against the Jin occupation troops and during the turmoil, another warlord, Liu Zhiyuan (895-948), entered the capital in 947 and proclaimed a new dynasty, the Later Han (947-951: 4 years).

This was the third Shatuo Turk dynasty and the shortest one as

Liu died within a year and was succeeded by his 19-year-old son who decided to attack the Qidan. But the Later Han was too weak to undertake an attack against a strong enemy and so the young emperor was murdered by the military and a boy emperor was put on the throne. A month later, Empress Dowager Li, acting as regent, deposed the boy and gave the throne to Guo Wei (904-954), who had fought for her husband, the founder of the Later Jin. Guo Wei declared a new dynasty, the Later Zhou (951-960: 9 years). He ruled for only three years and was succeeded by his adopted son, Chai Rong (921-959). Within six years, Chai was able to expand the empire and even tried to attack the Qidan but he became ill and died, leaving a boy emperor on the throne. His generals rallied around one of their own, Zhao Guangyin (927-976) removing the boy emperor from the throne and proclaiming Zhao emperor of the new Song dynasty (960-1279).²⁴

Unlike the north where the Five Dynasties conquered and succeeded each other, the Ten Kingdoms of the south existed more or less at the same time, fighting against each other. These kingdoms had never been conquered by the nomadic emperors of the north and prided themselves on their Confucian heritage. The Han heritage of literary achievement such as the writing of poetry and lyrics continued.

Women in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms

In the north, there was constant warfare and women were often kidnapped or raped, including upper class women. A few ended up as the empress of the founders such as Empress Liu (c.895-896) and Empress Wei (c.887) of the Later Tang, and Empress Li (c.960) of the Later Han. Other women were given to the soldiers after the royals tired of them. Royal women were able to wield power, 'especially as mothers.' Their influence was greatest during succession disputes or transitions of dynastic power and as mediators between the palace and the military. For example, Empress Dowager Cao (c.930) of the Later Tang was a great influence on her son. She

commanded such filial devotion from him that he would rush home three or four times a year, even during military campaigns. Empress Dowager Li (d.950) of the Later Jin directed talks with Yelu Deguang (r.927-947) of the Liao and in so doing saved the life of the emperor. Another Empress Dowager Li (d.960) of the Later Han served as regent for the young emperor. She relinquished her powers after 40 days and gave them to Guo Wei who then established the Later Zhou Dynasty.²⁵

The Confucian heritage and respect for literary accomplishment in the south produced women poets. Chen Jinfeng (893-935), was born towards the end of the Tang Dynasty. She was illegitimate and was abandoned, but then adopted by a family named 'Chen.' She had caught the eye of the founder of the Min Kingdom and became his concubine. She was a gifted poet and soon became his favorite. Despite the purity of Han heritage and its abhorrence of incest, the Emperor Taizong (r.926-935) of Min (893-935), took her, his father's concubine, as his empress.²⁶

Zhou Ehuang²⁷ (d.964), wife of Houzhu (r.961-975), the last emperor of Southern Tang (937-976), was also a poet. Her father was the minister of education and so she was brought up reading history and playing music. She was beautiful and was an excellent singer and dancer as well as a chess player. She became empress when her husband succeeded to the throne. During her final illness, her husband took her younger sister into the harem and she was said to have been very distressed. She died at the age of twenty-nine and her sister was named empress.

There was also a pair of sister poets, named Xu. The elder was the Grand Consort of Former Shu (d.926)²⁸ and the younger was named Empress Dowager after her son succeeded to the rulership of Former Shu (907-925). Aside from being poets they were said to have meddled in politics thus engineering the succession of the son of the younger sister. They were not able to sustain the kingdom and had to surrender to the Later Tang (923-926). Another poet was Empress

Dowager Xu (d.926) also known as 'Lady Huarui' (Flower Pistil) because of her fragile beauty. There might have been two beauties from Shu known as 'Lady Huarui.' The wife of Meng Chang (919-965), king of Later Shu (906-960), née Fei, was also so known. She and her husband were taken captive by the founder of the Song Dynasty. She was taken into his harem after her husband's death but she was devoted to his memory and kept his image claiming it to be that of a deity from Shu. Song Taizhu was enamored of her although his brother, the future Taizong warned that she was trying to poison him. When the warnings went unheeded, Taizong shot her to death at a hunt claiming it to be a hunting accident. Her beauty was said to have caused the third Song emperor, Zhenzong to seek a beauty from Shu. A young lady, Liu, was brought to him who later became his empress. She claimed to be the biological mother of the next emperor and later ruled as regent until her own death even after the emperor had come of age.²⁹

Chapter Six

The Great Female Emperor And the Royal Consorts of the Tang

The tartar blood and the nomadic heritage of the Tang imperial family produced powerful women who intruded into the political arena. The first and most ambitious was Wu Zetian, the only woman in 2,000 years of Chinese history to declare herself emperor of a new dynasty (Zhou: 690-705). Taking the title of Sacred and Divine Empress Regnant, she ruled in her own right as emperor for 14 years and 129 days.¹ The amazing thing is that she did so at the age of about 65 and only gave up the throne as the result of a coup when she was about 79 or 80. She had usurped the throne after having ruled for some thirty years; first in the name of her ailing husband; after his death, as regent for her sons.

Wu Zetian's success at becoming the first female emperor of China fueled the ambitions of her granddaughter, Princess Anle, who wanted to be made the successor to the throne of her father, Zhongzong. Anle's mother, Empress Wei, was equally ambitious and allegedly murdered her husband and placed a puppet on the throne so that she could rule, as regent. Their attempts were foiled by another ambitious woman, Wu Zetian's daughter, Princess Taiping.

Wu Zetian, the Great Female Emperor

Wu's mother, née Yang, was descended of the imperial family of the Sui Dynasty; but by the time Wu was born, her family was no longer considered noble. Her father was an early supporter of the founder of the Tang and so was able to place two daughters, Wu Zetian and her sister, into the palace as minor consorts of the second Tang emperor, Taizong. Neither of the Wu sisters gained favor with Taizong. Wu Zetian entered the palace at the age of fourteen and had the minor title of Talented One and was put in charge of clothing. She was twenty-five when Taizong died. Wu might not have had sexual relations with Taizong, but might have become very friendly with his son, the future emperor, Gaozong. The young prince had been a child of eight when his mother died and so had continued to live in the Inner Palaces. As required by tradition, when Taizong died, all his consorts who did not bear him children were sent into the nunnery.

On the anniversary of Taizong's death, Gaozong visited the temple and saw Wu Zetian again and his interest in her was renewed. At that time, Gaozong's empress, Wang (d.c. 655), was childless and Gaozong was enamored of a consort named Xiao (d.c. 655). On seeing Gaozong's interest in the young nun, Empress Wang saw an opportunity to bring a rival to Lady Xiao into the palace. The people of Han ethnicity would view Gaozong's taking of his father's concubine as incest. However, the Tang royal house was of mixed blood and so this action might have been accepted as 'levirate'—marrying the widow of the father to the son. On entering the palace, Wu quickly gained Gaozong's favor and gave birth to two sons. When the empress realized that Wu was a more dangerous rival than Xiao, she joined forces with Xiao in a campaign of slander against Wu. In retaliation, Wu allied herself with those palace women who hated the Empress and Xiao. She bribed them to be her spies and inform her of the activities of the Empress and Xiao.

Shortly afterwards, Wu gave birth to a daughter and the empress paid them a visit. The infant died shortly after. Many

speculated that Wu might have suffocated the infant and then gave the impression to the emperor that the empress had killed her. On learning of the death of his infant daughter, the emperor was furious and decided to demote the empress and name Wu in her place but there was opposition from the officials. In time, Gaozong and Wu were able to get enough support from the officials, and Empress Wang and Consort Xiao were accused of plotting to poison the emperor. The two women were demoted to commoner status and Wu Zetian was installed as Empress (655). Her son, Li Hung (652-75), was named heir in the following year. A month after becoming Empress, Wu killed the former empress and Consort Xiao by cutting off their arms and leaving them to die in a wine vat. She had the officials who opposed her promotion transferred and those who supported her promoted. She purged all those who had opposed her. These men were either transferred, banished, or killed. All the chief ministers who had served the former emperor, Taizong, were removed.

Gaozong was in poor health and in 657 he was forced to hold court only on alternate days. In 660, he suffered a serious stroke which left him partially paralyzed and with poor eyesight. Empress Wu began administering the empire during his illnesses and by the end of 660 Wu was ruler of the empire in fact although not in name. There was an attempt to demote her by accusing her of witchcraft but she was able to stop it by standing up to her accusers. Those who had supported demoting her were themselves demoted or banished. She then sat next to Gaozong, behind a screen, and supervised his handling of even the pettiest matters. The emperor was now powerless as all opposition to her had been removed. Some officials continued to oppose her involvement in governance as there was no precedent for the direct control of government by an empress during the emperor's lifetime. Wu looked for allegiance from groups whose support would give her prestige and influence, in particular from the literati and the Buddhist and Daoist clergy. In 674, she tried to get support from the common people and from the bureaucracy by suggesting a 12-point reform with the following main provisions:

- Encourage agriculture and sericulture and reduce taxes and labor services.
- Grant remission of taxes to the metropolitan districts.
- Cease military operations and transform the empire by the virtue of the Way.
- Avoid extravagance in the building of palaces.
- Reduce wasteful employment of *corvée* labor.
- Increase the opportunities for the expression of opinions to the throne.
- Suppress slander.
- Require the study of the Daoist writing, the *Daode Jing*, from everyone—from the princes and dukes down.
- Mourn the death of the mother for three years even when the father was still alive.
- All honorific officials who had received their documents of appointment before 674 could retain their titles regardless of how they were earned.
- Increase of salaries of metropolitan officials of the eighth rank and above.
- Long-serving officials, whose talent was greater than their rank, would be promoted.

Empress Wu's eldest son, the heir (d.675), had been a favorite of the emperor and of the court and had frequently taken the side of the emperor against the empress; advising her to be less controlling of governmental affairs. When he found that the two daughters of Consort Xiao had been kept in the palace for 20 years and were still unmarried he requested his father to allow them to marry. Wu was very displeased and immediately married them to two palace guards. The heir died suddenly and many suspected that he was poisoned by his mother. After his death, her second son, Li Xian (d.684), was named heir. Gaozong ordered that much of the government's matters be placed under the heir's purview and the heir was praised for making good decisions. Empress Wu felt threatened and began to float rumors that the heir was not really her son but the son of her sister who had entered the harem with her. She made a formal complaint that he was intimate with some of his household slaves and an investigation was conducted which found several suits of armor in the heir's stables and he was suspected of planning a coup. Under

interrogation, his favorite slave accused him of having murdered the fortune teller who had said that his younger brother had a more honorable appearance. The emperor did not completely believe in the charges and wanted to pardon the heir but the empress insisted that he be demoted to commoner status and imprisoned. He was then banished and committed suicide. His younger brother, Empress Wu's third son, Zhongzong, the seventh son of the emperor, was named heir at the age of 14 *sui*. By that time, Gaozong was sickly and was content with his nominal role as emperor and when he died Empress Wu became the Empress Dowager. Gaozong had stipulated in his will that 'in difficult matters regarding military and state affairs, the opinion of the empress dowager (Wu Zetian) should also be consulted.' This gave Wu the right to rule in her son's behalf even though he was twenty-eight years of age.

As the third son of the empress, Zhongzong's chance of succession was remote and he had not been prepared to become emperor. The first act of the young emperor was to name his father-in-law to head the examination bureau, a post for a chancellor. He also gave a mid-level office to the son of his wet nurse. These actions were opposed by officials who were appointed by his father. In response, Zhongzong said that as emperor he was all powerful and if he wished he could even give his father-in-law the entire empire. The officials reported this to his mother who decided to take his words literally. She summoned her son to the court, charged him with treason, and deposed him. He was dragged from the throne after being emperor for only two months. He and his pregnant empress were banished.

Wu then replaced him with his younger brother, her fourth son, Ruizong. Empress Dowager Wu now presided openly at both the administrative and ceremonial functions of the court, not bothering to hang the curtain. Ministers began to warn her that she was behaving like Empress Lü of the Han Dynasty but she ignored them. In 688, some of the princes of the imperial clan revolted and Wu purged the imperial family. Many rebellions arose in opposition to her assumption of power, but she was able to suppress them. In 690, Wu

made her son, Ruizong, abdicate and proclaimed herself emperor of a new dynasty (Zhou). Ruizong was forced to take her surname of 'Wu' and made her heir. He and his family were kept in isolation in the palace. In 693, two high level officials visited the deposed emperor and were publicly executed on charges of consulting fortune tellers and plotting Wu's assassination. Their sons were reduced in rank and suffered harsh punishment. Since the imperial princes had been purged there was no opposition to Wu's establishment of a new dynasty.²

Wu Zetian ruled for a total of about forty-five years; first she ruled in the name of her husband, as regent for her sons, then as emperor of her own dynasty. As emperor, she elevated the status of Buddhism above that of Daoism³, building Buddhist temples in each prefecture under the two capitals, Luoyang and Chang'an. She was also said to have built statues of Buddha with faces similar to her own so that she was seen as the 'living Buddha.' She developed and strengthened the existing examination system and personally selected men of talent to fill government positions. She allowed people to report anonymously on officials and quelled two rebellions. She enshrined seven generations of Wu ancestors at the imperial ancestral temple but in order not to offend the supporters of Tang rule, she continued to offer sacrifices to the three emperors of Tang. Sima Guang (1019-1086) noted that 'Although (the empress) bestowed official positions without careful assessment in order to gain the goodwill of the people, she also got rid of those who did not do a good job, punishing or executing them. She held tightly in her own hands the power of reward and punishment and made sure that governance issued exclusively from her. Because she was shrewd in recruiting talented people, had excellent judgment, and made decisions quickly, outstanding and intelligent people contended for the opportunity to serve her.'

One of her biggest problems was the issue of succession as having her own son, Ruizong, succeed her would return the rule to the Tang imperial family. Two of her nephews put up petitions to make

themselves her heir. Her officials advised her that if her nephews succeeded her, they would not sacrifice to her as an ancestor whereas her sons would. As Wu entered her seventies her ministers repeatedly asked that her son, the deposed emperor Zhongzong, be recalled. On his return, he was officially reinstated as the heir-apparent, At the age of eighty, Wu was moved to the palace designated for empress dowagers. She retained her title and the entire court paid homage to her twice a month. She died nine months after her removal from power and was interned in her husband's mausoleum.⁴

Tang Empresses

Empress Zhangsun⁵ (601-636)

Not all Tang empresses were powerful. Empress Zhangsun, wife of Taizong, came from a family that had helped in the overthrow of the Sui Dynasty. She was of Xianbei ancestry and belonged to the Tuoba tribe that had ruled all of Northern China under the Northern Wei Dynasty. Her father had been a general in the imperial palace during the Sui, her elder brother had helped the founder of Tang, Li Yuan, in his establishment of a new dynasty. This same brother was also a good friend of the second emperor, Taizong, and had participated in the coup against his eldest brother. Lady Zhangsun was married at the age of thirteen and became Taizong's official consort (618) and had actively supported her husband in his coup against his eldest brother. When her husband ascended the throne, she was named Empress the following year. She did not want her relatives to have powerful positions. Her brother resigned and received an honorary position. She had a good relationship with her husband and advised him to accept good suggestions and criticisms. He, in turn, accepted her advice on the appointment of good officials. Upon her death, she asked for a simple funeral.

Demoted Empress Wang⁶ (d.655)

Empress Wang, the most unfortunate of the Tang empresses, was recommended as the bride of Gaozong (r.649-683) by her great aunt who was a Tang princess. Wang did not give birth to any children and her husband was enamored with Consort Xiao⁷ who had given birth to a son and two daughters. In an attempt to take his attention away from Xiao, she suggested that he recall his father's concubine, Wu Zetian, from the temple. Soon Wu became the emperor's favorite and Xiao was forgotten. On seeing the emperor's obsession with Wu, Wang asked her mother to help her put a curse on her rival. When this was discovered, Wang's mother was forbidden to enter the palaces and both Wang and Xiao were demoted to

commoner status and imprisoned in separate courtyards. It was said that sometime later the emperor regretted of his actions and went to visit them. He tried to either have them released or to receive better treatment. When Wu learned of this, she had both women killed. Gaozong agreed to Wu's suggestion to change the surnames of both women, thus degrading them further. Wang's name was changed to Mang (python) and Xiao to another Chinese character that has the same romanization as Xiao but meaning 'owl.'

Empress Wei⁸ (c.665-710)

Empress Wei was the official wife of Zhongzong (r.684, 705-710), and wanted to emulate her mother-in-law, Wu Zetian, and become emperor. She was said to have poisoned her husband and delayed the announcement of his death. She called in a force of 50,000 troops to protect her with her nephew in command. She installed her husband's teen-age son as puppet emperor. Her husband's younger sister, Princess Taiping, and a nephew, the future Xuanzong (r.712-756) joined forces and made a surprise attack on the palace at night. Wei tried to escape but the soldiers she had gathered to protect her turned on her and killed her and her daughter, Princess Anle. Wei was posthumously stripped of her title and demoted to commoner status. She is called 'Commoner Wei' in the Old History of the Tang. In the New History of Tang she is listed as Empress Wei but then referred to in the text as 'Commoner née Wei.'⁹

Empress Zhang¹⁰ (d.762)

Empress Zhang, wife of Suzong (r.756-762), was married to her husband when he was heir-apparent to his father, Xuanzong. She was related to her husband as her maternal grandmother was the younger sister of his paternal grandmother. Zhang's family had benefitted from this relationship as Suzong was raised by his paternal grandmother. She and her husband accompanied Xuanzong when he fled the palace during the An Lushan Rebellion. Zhang urged her husband to fight and stayed close to him, sleeping at his feet at night.

She gave birth to a son during this time. Three days after childbirth, she resumed sewing clothes for the soldiers. Her husband admired her loyalty and she was named Empress when he assumed the throne. As empress, she began to interfere in state affairs, plotting to remove the heir apparent (Daizong: r. 762-779) and to place her own son on the throne. She was said to have been responsible for the death of one of Daizong's brothers, bringing false accusations against him after he criticized her in front of the emperor. When Daizong assumed the throne he demoted her to commoner status and installed his own birth mother as the Empress Dowager. Zhang was killed and all her relatives who had been given prominent positions were either killed or banished.

Empress Guo¹¹ (c.778-848)

The emperors and empresses, after the An Lushan Rebellion, were very weak as power was in the hands of the Regional Military Governors. Empress Guo was the consort of Xianzong (r.805-820). Her grandfather was a famous general who was credited with having crushed the An Lushan Rebellion. She lived through the reigns of seven emperors during a time of political instability. Guo was never an empress during the lifetime of her husband and was given the title Empress Dowager when her son ascended the throne as Muzong (r.820-824); then as Grand Empress Dowager when her grandson was enthroned as Jingzong (r. 824-827). Jingzong was murdered by eunuchs who tried to place a puppet on the throne but this coup was soon quelled and Guo named another grandson as emperor, Wenzong (r.827-840). Upon the latter's death another grandson ascended the throne as Wuzong (r.840-846). The reigns of her grandsons were short and not all died of natural causes. But, Guo was notable because of her contributions to the governance of Tang during this time of turmoil through her advice and admonitions to her grandsons. When the son by another concubine, of Xiangzong, Consort Zheng¹² (d.865), assumed the throne as Xuanzong (r.846-859)¹³ he named his biological mother empress dowager. Guo was relegated into the background and was given no respect within the palaces. Zheng had

begun her career as a serving woman of Guo and resented her. Guo became very unhappy and it was alleged that she tried to jump off a high terrace. This angered the emperor and that evening she died suddenly and was buried outside of the tomb of her husband. It was not until the reign of Emperor Yizong (r.859-873) that her tablet was moved into her husband's temple.

Empress He¹⁴ (c.810-905)

Empress He, the wife of Zhaozong (r.888-904), and the mother of Aidi (r. 904-907), lived during the Huang Chao Rebellion. Her husband was placed on the throne by eunuchs. They were driven from the palace many times and her husband was finally murdered by Zhu Wen¹⁵ (d.912) who enthroned her twelve-year-old son as a puppet emperor. Zhu Wen also named He as Empress Dowager. The mother and son were terrified of Zhu Wen and did not dare mourn Zhaozong. In 905, Zhu Wen accused He of opposing him and not presenting him with the 'nine gifts' which traditionally would signify passing of the throne to Zhu Wen, the usurper. Empress He was then strangled and demoted to commoner status. Three years later, Tang Dynasty officially ceased to exist. Empress He lived at a time of great upheaval when the royal court was powerless and controlled by factions. History says that she preserved her dignity and discharged her responsibilities with honor.¹⁶

Imperial Consorts

***Xu Hui*¹⁷ (627-650)**

Xu Hui was known as one of Taizong's wisest consorts. She came from an educated family, was educated and could write poetry. Her nephew was a policy advisor and her sister was a consort to the next emperor, Gaozong. Xu Hui had successfully persuaded Taizong to stop using commoners as soldiers and as construction laborers for the palaces. She was only twenty-three when Taizong died. She was said to be desolate and refused medical treatment. She died the following year.

***Jiang Caiping*¹⁸ (c.725-756)**

Jiang Caiping, also known as Mei, the Plum Blossom Consort, was a consort of Xuanzong. She came from a family of physicians and was said to have been able to recite and sing the *Book of Songs* at the age of nine. She was recruited into Xuanzong's harem at the age of fifteen. Her biography is not found in either the *Old History of Tang* or the *New History of Tang*. A highly romanticized version of her biography can be found in Ming writings and some regard her as a fictional character. She was favored by the emperor until he became infatuated with Yang Guifei.

***Yang Guifei*¹⁹ (719-750)**

Imperial consorts could be powerful if they could hold the love and interest of the emperor. The most powerful was Yang Guifei, the last love of the great emperor Xuanzong. She is known as one of the four beauties²⁰ of China. She entered the palaces when she became the consort of Xuanzong's son, Li Mao (715-775)²¹. Xuanzong met Yang when he was 53 and she was 19, two years after her marriage to Li Mao. The emperor became completely smitten with her. To avoid the scandals if he openly took the wife of his son, he arranged for her to become a Daoist nun within the palace grounds. The two carried on a relationship for three years until Li Mao took another wife. Three

weeks after that she officially became Xuanzong's consort with a title of Precious Consort. Her family members received honors and gifts. Her cousin was named chief minister and his corrupt practices have been blamed for the decline of Tang and for the rise of rebellions.

All other consorts were forgotten after Yang received the emperor's favor and Yang was indulged and had her every whim fulfilled. The Turkish general, An Lushan (703-757) became friendly with the emperor and with Yang. He became the 'adopted son' of the two and was able to freely go into the inner palaces. On one occasion, Yang had him dressed and presented to court as a baby in swaddling clothes. An was very ambitious and after several disagreements with the chief minister he rose in rebellion. The emperor and Yang fled. Angry soldiers killed the chief minister, Yang's cousin. They blamed Consort Yang for their troubles and refused to defend the emperor until Yang was strangled.²² The emperor never recovered from her death.

Lady Dong (772-837)

Despite the fact that Tang was much reduced after Xuanzong's reign, the courtesan culture continued to thrive. Lady Dong, probably from an entertainment family, was selected to serve as a palace musician at the age of fifteen. She was said to have been exceptionally beautiful and a great dancer. She performed for three successive emperors who reigned from 779 to 820. She was also chosen as a consort to Dezong (r. 779-904). In her later years, she taught dance to palace entertainers.

Rise and Fall of Empresses and Consorts

Tang was a time of powerful women. Many factors had to be in place for these women to gain and maintain power. ²³ First and foremost is the favor of the emperor and giving birth to sons. Wu Zetian had the favor of the emperor and had given birth to four sons. She destroyed two while they were heirs to the throne. The other two sat on the throne for a short time before she forced their abdication. The opportunity to learn to govern if the emperor was sickly is important. This also applied in Wu's case. Another factor is the death of an emperor and the succession of a new emperor which provides a vacuum and creates an opportunity for grabbing power. Wu ruled as regent after her husband's death then usurped the throne declaring herself emperor.

Empress Wei tried to seize the throne after the death of her husband but failed as she was foiled by another powerful woman, the Princess Taiping. Longevity is also an important factor. Wu lived a long life and was able to rule both as regent and as emperor. Empress Guo, consort to Xianzong, lived through the reigns of seven emperors during a time of political instability. She became the Grand Empress Dowager when her grandson was enthroned as Jingzong. She was able to name another grandson as emperor Wenzong and then another grandson as Wuzong.

Not giving birth to sons meant the downfall of many empresses such as Wang, empress to Gaozong. During the Tang, consorts who had not given birth to children would be sent to the nunnery upon the death of the emperor. Political instability also caused the downfall of empresses and consorts such as Empresses Wei, He, and Consort Yang. Life in the palace and the struggle for power was very dangerous, not only for the woman but for her entire family as they would share the fate of the unfortunate woman.

Conclusions

Women in the Tang were the most ambitious palace women in Chinese history. There were numerous prominent women in non-traditional roles. Princess Pingyang led an army to fight for her father to overturn the Sui and establish the Tang. It was also the time when Wu Zetian was not satisfied with just being a regent; instead, she usurped the throne when she was no longer young and governed as a self-proclaimed emperor in her own dynasty. The issue of succession was always most important as it was a time when different men schemed to succeed to the throne. Succession was the biggest problem to Wu Zetian. Her own sons were the heirs to the Tang throne, not to the Zhao dynasty. If she allowed her nephews to succeed, they would not offer sacrifice to her after life as she was not their direct ancestor. Tang was also the time when the only woman, Princess Anle, hoped to succeed to her father's throne. She was not able to do so as there was no tradition of women succeeding to the throne. The most powerful princess in Chinese history was Princess Taiping. She was able to restore both her brothers to the throne.

Part III

960 C.E.-1279 C.E.

Chapter Seven

The Song and her Neighboring States

The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period lasted for less than eighty years but left its mark on the next three hundred. While the founders of Song were able to take over the throne of the Later Zhou and conquer the ten kingdoms of the south, they were never able to recover areas previously under the Tang Dynasty. The northwestern area, referred to by China as the ‘Xia,’ was occupied by the Tangut clan that had come into Tang territory from their homelands to assist in putting down the Huang Chao Rebellion. The Tanguts resisted Song expansion and claimed independence establishing the Xi Xia (Western Xia) Dynasty (1038-1227). The north was occupied by the Qidan who had come from their homelands to assist the Shatuo Later Jin Dynasty in overthrowing the Later Tang. The Qidan was rewarded by the ceding of sixteen prefectures in the north. In so doing, the Qidan expanded their homelands to include the north-eastern part of China. Their leader became a Chinese-styled emperor and declared a new dynasty, Liao (907-1125).[\[View Map\]](#)¹[\[View Map\]](#)²

The Song Dynasty was ruled by Han Chinese for 319 years and was divided into two distinct periods—the Northern Song, with its capital in Kaifeng, and the Southern Song, with its capital in present-day Hangzhou. From 960-1227, Song shared its western borders with the Xi Xia or Western Xia. The Mongols became Song’s western neighbors after it conquered the Western Xia. The Liao were Song’s northeastern neighbor from 960-1125. After the Jurchen conquered the Liao and established the Jin (Gold) dynasty, she became Song’s northeastern neighbor. Two years later she pushed the Song south and blocked the latter from any access to Inner Asia. Song had to depend on establishing sea routes for trading and travelling purposes. The Mongols eventually defeated both the Jurchen and the Song and ruled all of China as the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

Despite the fact that the Song was a regional government, it has been the focus of historians as it was the first time that a Han Chinese dynasty had conquered, and was able to rule, a large area in the north since the non-Hans pushed the Han Chinese rulers of the Jin Dynasty south in 316. The Song Dynasty is also important as it was the first government in world history to issue banknotes or paper money, the first to use gunpowder and compass, as well as the first Chinese government to establish a permanent standing navy.

The Song Dynasty

The founder of the Song, Zhao Guangyin, rose to power through an incident at the Bridge of Chen when his army was said to have placed a yellow robe on him, a symbol of imperial authority. He was said to have had no choice but to assume the title of emperor and so returned to the capital at the head of the army. The empress dowager of the Later Zhao, as regent to the six-year-old emperor, had to abdicate and recognize Zhao as the emperor of a new dynasty. To concentrate his power and to ensure that the military would not rise against him, the founding emperor retired the army that brought him to power. He promised to arrange marriages between his family and those of his loyal followers. He curbed eunuch power by forbidding them to participate in politics and ensuring that their position would always remain that of servants. He restored civilian authority and ensured peace by sparing the family members of the Later Zhou imperial family.³

The Song tried many times to recover the sixteen prefectures ceded by the Later Jin to the Qidan Liao. It was never successful even though the Song population outnumbered the Liao twenty to one. Therefore, Song was forced to recognize the Liao as equal sovereigns and pay them large subsidies in exchange for peace. The Shanyuan treaty (1005) was negotiated with the Liao and led to about one hundred years of peace. After the Jurchen⁴ had conquered the Qidan Liao and founded the Jin (Gold) Dynasty, they began eyeing Song for possible expansion. In 1127, the Jin armies attacked and defeated Song twice. The first time, Song Huizong (r.1100-1126) abdicated in favor of his son. The second time, the Jin took the entire court captive to their homeland. The three thousand captives included two emperors, almost the entire imperial clan, the consorts, princes and princesses as well as eunuchs, entertainers, artisans and servants. The only one who was not captured was Prince Kang, one of Huizong's sons. Prince Kang had earlier been sent as a hostage to the Jin court but was released as the Jin did not believe he was Huizong's son. As the only member of the imperial family not in captivity, Prince Kang

(Gaozong: 1127-1162) was able to rally supporters and establish his court in present-day Hangzhou, thus keeping the Song dynasty alive for another 152 years.

Succession

Zhao Guangyin was succeeded by his brother, Zhao Guangyi (939-997) who had helped him conquer the Empire and so thought he should be the next emperor. The founding emperor had designated his eldest son as heir but the heir was set aside and his brother assumed the throne as Taizong (r.976-997). This was the nomadic form of fraternal succession, a form well understood by the Chinese after having been ruled by different non-Han rulers. Taizong justified his usurpation on the pretext of being a filial and obedient son who had to follow the wishes of his mother. Before her death, she had allegedly said to the founding emperor, 'The only reason you are on the throne today is because the late emperor of the Later Zhou foolishly named a young child as his successor. If you are succeeded by a child, our dynasty will suffer the same fate.' She then said that the throne was to be passed to his younger brother, then to the next younger one, and then returned to the son of the founding emperor.

Taizong may have used this to take over the throne but had no intention of following it to the letter. Once he succeeded to the throne he made his own eldest son the heir. He said he could not follow his mother's wishes as the younger brother was not born of his mother but was only the son of a wet nurse. As such he did not qualify as his successor. He also ordered the suicide of his nephew, the former heir. Taizong's appointed heir never succeeded to the throne as he became mentally imbalanced and set fire to the palace. He was deposed and Taizong's third son was named heir.

The founding emperor's descendants were not returned to the throne for over two hundred years. The founder of the Southern Song, Gaozong, ruled for more than 35 years and outlived his only son and heir. As all of Taizong's descendants had been captured and taken

north, Gaozong adopted a seventh generation descendant of the founding emperor. Six of the Southern Song emperors, before 1275, did not have surviving sons and had to adopt sons from less prestigious branches of the imperial clan.⁵

Marriage Policy

In disbanding his supporters, the founding emperor had promised that their families would intermarry with the imperial family and this policy was followed for several generations. In time, marriage policies changed according to imperial needs and personal preferences. As empresses are chosen by the preceding emperor and empress, the young women selected may not be favored by their husbands. These unfortunate women could be deposed after the deaths of their patrons. The sons and daughters of the imperial clan were also used for marriage alliances with the bureaucracy and most of the wives of the Northern Song clansmen were from long-established and successful bureaucratic families near Kaifeng.

In the early Song, the princesses married military men but by the late Northern Song they married men from families in the civil service. At times, the marriages were with relatives such as in the case of the Princess Supreme of Zhou and Chen states. She was the favorite daughter of Renzong (r.1022-1063), who married her to his maternal cousin. She received a very large dowry of 20 horses, 20 cows, 2 camels, 200 sheep, 50 *qing* of land (about 800 acres), three estates, 10 slaves, 2 house officials, and four cooks.⁶ The princesses were of higher status than their spouses and were supposed to be treated as such but this slowly changed and the princesses were told to be filial to their mothers-in-law. Princesses received very large dowries and Emperor Shenzong (r.1067-1085) said that the cost of marrying one princess could run to 700,000 strings of cash. Lizong (r.1224-1264) loved his only surviving daughter and when it came time for her to marry, the officials suggested that she be married to the one who came first in the imperial examinations. The princess peeked at the candidate from behind the screen and decided that she did not like

him. The emperor then married her to the nephew of one of his former consorts, Empress Yang (d.1232). Not wanting her to live far away from him, the emperor built her a residence with a special passageway to his palace so that he could visit her often. She received many advancements but she died at the tender age of 22.⁷

The End of the Song

The Mongols began attacking the Southern Song in 1268 after conquering the Xi Xia and the Jin. In 1276, the Song court fled to Guangdong by boat leaving the Empress Dowager, the Empress, and the then young emperor to negotiate surrender terms. The court, in exile, first named as emperor a nine-year old son of the previous emperor. But the young boy soon became ill and died. His seven-year-old half-brother was then named emperor. After the Song army was defeated in its last battle against the Mongols in the Pearl River Delta, a high official, loyal to the Song, was said to have taken the boy emperor in his arms and jumped from the cliff into the sea, drowning both of them.

The Xi Xia (Western Xia)

The Xi Xia called themselves the 'Great Xia State of the White and Lofty' but Chinese history referred to them as the Xi (Western) Xia as they were in the western part of China occupying the area originally known as 'Xia.' The state borders the trade route and was ruled by the Tangut clan of the Qiang tribe. The Tangut had submitted to the Tang and was given the imperial name of 'Li,' the name of the Tang imperial house. Towards the end of the Tang Dynasty, they brought troops from their homeland to suppress the Huangchao Rebellion on behalf of the Tang court and took control of the Xia area in northern Shanxi in 991. After the Tang fell in 907, they resisted the expanding Song and claimed independence establishing the Xi Xia Dynasty in 1038. After intense negotiations, Xi Xia agreed to recognize the Song emperor as 'emperor' and as the *de facto* ruler of the Tanguts in exchange for an annual tribute. The Song gave them silk, cash, tea and annual donations of winter clothing. They were in a remote and difficult to reach part of the country and ruled for 189 years. The Xi Xia ruled over a multicultural population with a majority of Han Chinese until they were conquered by the Mongols in 1227.

Maternal Relatives

Maternal relatives held great power during the first half of the Xi Xia Dynasty. The founding emperor had taken the bride of one of his sons as a concubine and she had given birth to a son. The clan of the empress saw this as a threat to her son, the heir. They hatched a plot to assassinate the emperor by inviting him to the wedding of the heir-apparent. The plot leaked out and the conspirators were executed. The empress escaped punishment but was later demoted and her son was deposed as heir. The new favorite was made empress but the deposed empress was still powerful and she placed a woman from the Muocang clan into the harem to interest the emperor hoping thus to wean him away from his then favorite.

This new consort, Lady Muocang, gave birth to a male child who was brought up in the home of his mother's brother. When the emperor died, the council chiefs met to decide on the succession. All agreed that the heir named in the emperor's will should succeed but the uncle of the new child disagreed and persuaded the council to name his infant nephew as emperor (Yizong: r.1048-68). The mother, Lady Muocang, was named empress dowager. The uncle was named regent and ruled as *de facto* ruler.

Xi Xia was in the control of the Muocang family for fifteen years. However, when the young emperor grew older he became more independent and at the age of fourteen he eliminated the regent with the help of the unhappy wife of the regent's son. He then took this young woman, Lady Liang, into the palace and named her younger brother as palace minister with hereditary tenure. With this change, power moved from the Muocang family to that of the Liang family. Liang empresses and their brothers ruled over Xi Xia for the next two generations. During this time, Liang empresses led armies that defeated the Song.

The third Xi Xia emperor, Huizong (r.1068-1086), succeeded to the throne at the age of seventeen. He was also married to one of his uncle's daughters to ensure the Liang family's hold on power. When he died, his three-year old son, Chongzong (r.1086-1139), became emperor under the regency of Huizong's widow. This new Empress Dowager Liang again ruled with her brother as palace minister. However, when she later led an unsuccessful attack against the Song, Chongzong used this as the reason to reclaim his power. After this incident, the Liang family was unable to marry another woman into the imperial family and so lost their power.

The End of Xi Xia

The Mongol Empire campaigned six times against the Xi Xia over a period of twenty-two years. After Xi Xia was defeated in war in 1207, the ruler submitted to the Mongols giving his daughter to

Genghis Khan (1167-1227) in marriage together with the promise to support Genghis in war if needed. In 1216, the Mongols asked their allies for military aid in the campaigns against the Islamic countries; although the Xi Xia emperor was willing, his court and generals recommended against it. This angered Genghis. Ten years later, Genghis returned from the west and attacked Xi Xia destroying the capital the following year. Not happy about their betrayal and resistance, Genghis Khan ordered the execution of the entire imperial family and the destruction of Xi Xia.

The Liao (907-1125)

The Liao was ruled by the Qidan for about 218 years, longer than any previous dynasty except for the Han and the Tang. The Qidan lived in the north in the eastern portions of present-day Mongolia. The Tang court had given them the imperial name of 'Li.' During the Five Dynasties Period, it helped the Shatuo Turkic Later Jin dynasty take over the Later Tang. In addition to the sixteen prefectures in northern China, stretching from present-day Beijing westward to Datong, they were also given the control of the passes that oversaw entry into China Proper. The Liao emperors ruled over a multiracial population with a Han Chinese majority. In 1125, Liao was conquered by another non-Han tribe, the Jurchen, who then established the Jin (Gold) Dynasty.

The founder of Liao, Yelu Abaoji (872-926), chief of the Qidan, was elected as the leader of a military alliance. His most difficult problem was to have the Qidan accept him as the permanent leader as the Qidan re-elect their ruler every three years. He served for nine years and then was pressured to step down. His wife helped him ambush and murder the other chiefs and with the help of Chinese advisors, he declared himself emperor of the Qidan Empire. In 916, when election was again due he went through a Chinese ceremony and claimed the title of emperor and adopted a reign title. As a Chinese-style emperor he claimed he was the equal of Chinese rulers and had a life-long tenure. He named his eldest son, Bei (903-37) as his successor. His brothers, uncles, and cousins still believed in the traditional three-year term and when he abolished the custom of limited terms and fraternal succession, they began to rebel but he successfully defeated them. He faced another rebellion in 917 that he was able to suppress. Three years later, his brothers had given up rebelling. Unlike other emperors who would kill the brothers for rebelling, Yelu Abaoji never killed his brothers; instead he killed the supporters of his brothers. The Qidan Empire grew and developed for about 40 years before it expanded into north China. The Song was forced to recognize them as equal sovereigns and pay them large

subsidies in exchange for peace.

Marriage Policy

The Liao practiced a unique marriage policy in which the imperial clan could only intermarry with a special clan, the consort clan. This was established by the founding emperor in appreciation of the support of his wife and her family in the founding of a new dynasty. The imperial clan, the Yelu, would only take wives from the founding emperor's wife's Xiao clan. So the Yelu and the Xiao clan intermarried with each other. The Yelu men would take Xiao brides and the Xiao men would take Yelu brides. This way, the power remained in the hands of these two clans. Ideally, the empress would come from the dominant Xiao clan, a descendant from the father of the founding empress. The third Liao emperor wanted to weaken the power of the lineage of the founding empress and to broaden the base of the consort clan. He named a Chinese woman as his empress and as a result he faced a rebellion. He was forced to take another Xiao woman as empress; he refused to demote his original empress and instead had two empresses. He gave the name of Xiao to groups loyal to him and these adopted persons were encouraged to marry into the highest Yelu lineages, including the imperial line. This strategy did not survive his death and the lineages of the honorific Xiao families became unimportant and power continued to reside in the hands of the original Xiao families.⁸

The End of the Liao

The Liao was able to win many concessions from the Song and had successfully resisted efforts to become involved in the quarrels of the Song and the Xi Xia. By 1112, Liao had been at peace with Song for some time and due to their adopted sedentary lifestyle held a defensive attitude towards their nomadic neighbor, the Jurchen to the north. The state appeared to be secure. In late winter the imperial entourage, according to custom, went on its seasonal fishing expedition near Harbin. According to custom, the chieftains of the

northeastern tribes, including the Jurchen from eastern Manchuria, were to come and pay homage. When it was the turn of the Jurchen, one of the representatives, Aguda refused to do so. The Liao emperor wanted to have him executed but was persuaded against doing so. Afterward, Aguda proclaimed himself emperor of a new Jin (Gold) dynasty. The Jurchen attacked the Supreme Capital which was the Liao religious and ritual center. The invaders looted and destroyed the buildings at the imperial tombs and other vital religious sites. The demoralized Liao court was once more shaken by internal dissension. Conspiracies at court led to one of the principal conspirators escaping to the Jurchen. He then led a Jurchen army in an attack on the Central capital which fell. The Jin kept their tribal homeland but established their capital in China.

The Jin (Gold) Dynasty

The dynasty was established by the Wanyan clan of the Jurchen. Wanyan Aguda (r.1115-1123), was a tribal chief and founder of the Jurchen Jin (Gold) dynasty. Aguda united all Jurchens under Wanyan leadership and attacked the Liao border positions. In 1115, he assumed the title of emperor and adopted the dynastic name of Jin (Gold) taken from the name of a river. In 1117, Song sent an envoy to the Jurchen and negotiated a Song-Jurchen alliance against the Liao. Aguda successfully attacked the Supreme Capital and the Western Capital and the Song became alarmed as they had not yet attacked Liao as promised. The Song invaded the Southern Capital of the Liao but was defeated thus signaling their weakness to the Jin. Aguda took the Southern Capital by the end of 1122 and in the following year, the Liao Central Capital in Manchuria fell and the entire imperial family was captured. The Jurchen now ruled over large parts of northern China. After taking over North China, the Jurchen moved their capital from northern Manchuria (south of present-day Harbin) to present-day Beijing.

The Jin then waged a full scale war against the Song and crossed the Yellow River laying siege to the Song capital. The terms for their withdrawal were that the Song cede three prefectures to the Jin and make annual payments of 300,000 taels of silver, 300,000 bolts of silk and 1 million strings of coin. After the siege was lifted, Song Huizong abdicated and Song Qinzong (r.1126-7) became emperor. War began again when the Jin complained that the Song was breaking the peace agreement by inducing former Liao generals to attack them. The Jin armies crossed the Yellow River and the victorious army entered Kaifeng after heavy fighting. The Song surrendered and Emperors Qinzong and Huizong were degraded as commoners. They were taken north and forced to wear mourning clothes to pay respect to the spirit of Aguda in his mausoleum. Six Song princesses were given as wives to members of the imperial Wanyan clan and the entire Song court and family members were made prisoners. Although the Jurchens had captured the Song capital

of Kaifeng, they were unable to drive the Song out of southern China.

The End of the Jin

When the Mongols attacked, the Jin at first refused to agree to a peace in which it would be forced to pay subsidies, as did the preceding dynasties, the Han, the Tang or the Song. Instead, it battled the Mongols for a quarter of a century before the Jin was destroyed. The Jin had strengthened their northwestern borders with troops of Qidan and Xi Xia descent rather than with their own troops and the Mongols overran these borders. The Jin asked the Mongols for peace and offered a princess in marriage to Genghis Khan. After the Mongols withdrew from the Central Capital, the then Jin emperor decided it would be safer to move his court to the Southern Capital which was protected in the north by the Yellow River. The Mongols took this as a preparation for war and marched against them. The Jin surrendered in 1215. After the defeat, the Jurchens returned to Manchuria and in time their descendants, the Manchus, conquered China and established the Qing Dynasty.

The Great Warrior Empresses and the Female Regents of the Song

While Han Chinese regents of the Song Dynasty ruled in the name of the emperor and had *de facto* power, the non-Han regents of Xi Xia and Liao had political power as well as led armies in battle. Non-Han nomadic women had survived in hostile living conditions and had a greater range of rights and responsibilities than Han Chinese women who lived in a sedentary and agricultural society. The wives of non-Han tribal leaders were often regarded as co-rulers with their husbands and were included in the religious and ritual life of their society. During the Xi Xia Dynasty, the Liang regents co-ruled with their brothers and led armies against the Song and were most often victorious. The emperor was only able to remove the Liang family from power when the last Liang warrior empress dowager was defeated in a battle by the Song. While the history of the Xi Xia records palace intrigues, they did not record enough information about these great warrior empresses and their deeds for us to know more about the lives of these women.¹ On the other hand, there is quite a lot of information about the great warrior empresses of the Liao. At least two of the Liao warrior empresses had their own ordo² with cavalry numbering 200,000 in the ordo of the founding empress, Yingtian, and 20,000 in that of a later empress, Chengtian. Much of the information about the Jin is not available in either Chinese nor English so not much is known of the women of the Jin (Gold) dynasty.

Song officials were concerned about the power of palace women as they were familiar with the history of the usurpation of the throne by Wu Zetian in the Tang Dynasty. They tried their best to curtail the power of these women. For example, after the death of her husband, Empress Dowager Xiang (1045-1101) chose Huizong (r.1100-1126) to succeed to the throne. Huizong wanted to keep her as regent. The officials were against this and a compromise was finally reached that she would be regent until the funeral of her husband.

Xiang signed the agreement and honored it by immediately resigning her position after the funeral of Shenzong (r.1067-1085).³ And so, palace women in the Song had to tread carefully even though many regents felt themselves more capable of governing than their charges.

The Warrior Empresses of the Liao

*Empress Dowager Yingtian*⁴

The wife of the founding emperor, the Empress Yingtian (879-953), had been a great power during her husband's lifetime. She had her own military camp and commanded an army of 200,000 horsemen. She devised the plan for him to murder the tribal chiefs who opposed him. She maintained order when her husband was away on campaigns and organized campaigns against rival tribes. After his death, she changed the expectations of widows in Qidan society by refusing to be buried with him saying that her sons needed her guidance. Instead, she cut off her right hand and buried it in his mausoleum. Three hundred persons were buried with him to serve him in his afterlife. As the senior widow, Yingtian served as regent and took control of all military and civil affairs. She did not favor the succession of her eldest son to the founder's throne as she thought him to have adopted too much Chinese culture. Instead, she preferred that her second son Yelu Deguang (902-947) succeed as he was more of a leader in the Qidan tradition. Her eldest son sensed her disapproval and persuaded the Qidan court that he should be passed over in favor of his younger brother. He then approached his mother and formally withdrew his claim and the second son became emperor, Liao Taizong (r.926-947).

Taizong loved his elder brother's son and treated him as his own. The two fought together in campaigns against the Jurchen. The young man was also respected by the Qidan leadership as he was a brave and capable commander. When Taizong died, the young man declared himself emperor Shizong (r.947-951). But Empress Dowager Yingtian did not want her grandson to succeed. She wanted the throne to pass on to her third son. She sent him with an army to block her grandson's return to the capital, but her son was defeated. At the age of 68, Yingtian led her own army against her grandson but was defeated as well. When her grandson succeeded as emperor he exiled both his uncle and his grandmother from the capital.

The second famous warrior empress, Empress Dowager Chengtian (969-1009), was the wife of the fifth emperor, Jingzong (r.969-982). The emperor was in poor health and his wife had assisted in government. With her help he had successfully suppressed the rebellion of the northern tribe (970). As Jingzong's health worsened, his empress began to take charge of all governmental affairs and so after his death she was ready to rule as regent for her 11-year-old son, Shenzong (r.982-1031).

Immediately after she became regent, Empress Dowager Chengtian underwent the ritual of 'rebirth' which confirms the new emperor's right to rule in the eyes of the Qidan aristocracy. This practice was reserved for emperors but Chengtian went through it, not once, but three times—twice in 984 and again in 986. This was an extraordinary step to ensure her power as regent. She remained in control until her death; all senior ministers were appointed by her. Even when the emperor was a grown man, she continued to browbeat and strike him in public.

When Shenzong was enthroned in 982, Liao was on the brink of war with the Song who wanted to recover the sixteen prefectures ceded to the Qidan during the Five Dynasties Period. Empress Dowager Chengtian led full-scale invasions with her son even when she was over 60 years old (1004). Their campaigns were so successful that they came near the Song capital of Kaifeng. Negotiations began with her approval and the Treaty of Shanyuan was signed with the Song in 1004. According to the Treaty, the Song would pay the Liao 200,000 lengths of silk and 100,000 ounces of silver as a 'contribution to military expenses' every year. The Song emperor was to refer to the Liao emperor as younger brother and the Empress as aunt.

Empress Dowager Chengtian was a ruler who understood the realities of power and was always willing to listen to advice and so won the deep loyalty of both Qidan and Han Chinese officials. The *Liao-shi* (History of the Liao) sums up her achievement by saying,

‘Shenzong may be considered the most successful of the Liao emperors; most of his successes must be attributed to his mother’s instruction.’

Regents of the Song

Nine empress dowagers acted as regents during the Song Dynasty; their rule ranged in time from one day to over eleven years. Only two regents served until their deaths.⁶ Regents had different styles of governing depending on their personalities and the needs of the times they lived in. Some ruled as *de facto* sovereigns; others kept low profiles and more or less rubber stamped the recommendations of the chief officials. Some ruled during times when there was a sudden need to find a replacement emperor; others ruled through influencing the emperor. The less fortunate ones ruled during times of defeat and had to negotiate surrender terms with the conqueror.

Regents Ruling as de facto Sovereigns

Two regents ruled as *de facto* sovereigns during the Song. The first was Empress Dowager Liu (969-1033). She was the first regent since Empress Wu of the Tang had usurped the throne and had declared herself the first female emperor of a new dynasty.⁷ The officials must have been apprehensive and concerned about the possibility of a recurrence of female power and Liu must have been careful not to abuse her power. We can see how the officials and history viewed her regency from a memorial by Sima Guang (1019-1086). He wrote to remind Empress Cao (1017-1079) not to abuse her powers when she was preparing to assume a regency.

‘In the past, when the emperor had succeeded to the throne, the Zhangxian Mingsu Empress Dowager Liu protected the emperor’s body, gave laws to the realm, advanced the worthy and expelled the disloyal and pacified core and periphery—in this she truly made great contributions to the house of Zhao. But the rituals (associated with) her person at times involved excessive veneration, some among her vulgar relatives disgraced their official posts, and there were those among the flattering ministers who usurped and abused their power—in these matters she can be faulted to the world.’⁸

We can see from his words that the politicians of that period considered Liu to be a good ruler except for the abuse in the ritual area where she overstepped her position by wearing imperial robes and a crown when she went to offer sacrifices at the Imperial

Ancestral Temple. This ritual was an action reserved for emperors and her action was especially abhorrent as the then emperor, Renzong (1022-1063), was already of age and was the legitimate ruler of China.

Empress Dowager Liu⁹

Empress Liu was an entertainer who was recommended to the young future emperor, Zhenzong (r.997-1022). The young prince became infatuated with her. When his father, Taizong, asked the wet nurse why the young man seemed listless and thin, the wet nurse reported that the presence of the young Lady Liu was the cause. Taizong then ordered Liu out of his son's palace but the young prince sheltered her in a friend's home. After Zhenzong became emperor, he summoned her back into the palace as a secondary consort. When his empress died, he wanted to name her his empress but the officials objected on the basis of her dubious background. In 1010, a palace woman gave birth to a son and Liu claimed the child, the future Renzong (r.1022-1064), as her biological son. He was named heir and she, as the mother, was named empress. Renzong never knew that Liu was not his biological mother until after her death. When Renzong succeeded to the throne at the age of thirteen, Liu became the Empress Dowager and regent.

During her regency,¹⁰ Empress Dowager Liu consolidated her power and governed as *de facto* sovereign until her death despite calls for her retirement. She held court behind a lowered screen. Ruling supreme, she alone made the final decisions on state policies. She was praised for heeding her advisors and for using capable men wisely. Although Liu allowed debate at court, she was ruthless in punishing her critics and the most outspoken ones were dismissed to the provinces. She was also willing to forgive them if they showed true repentance. She was grateful to those who had helped her and rewarded the family of the man who had recommended her to the palace. She gave him, his sons,

his sons-in-law, and his grandson, numerous important positions. She also rewarded the man who had sheltered her when Taizong forced her out of the palace of the heir. All of this man's thirty-two sons and grandsons were given official positions and the family was able to enter civil service for the next three generations through *yin* privilege.¹¹ Liu left a will stipulating that another palace woman, who had helped her claim Renzong as her biological son, succeed her as regent even though Renzong was already 23 years old. Her wishes were not honored as neither the emperor, nor his officials, were willing to tolerate another regency. Renzong's biological mother had died the year before Liu's death and Liu had wanted to have the woman buried as an ordinary palace woman. On the advice of an official she agreed to have her buried, dressed, in the manner befitting the mother of an emperor.¹²

Empress Dowager Liu assumed the role of sovereign to the extent that she took special names on the occasions of her birthdays. She even performed the ritual of ceremonial plowing and ancestral worship in the Imperial Ancestral Temple. All of these acts are prerogatives of an emperor. Furthermore, in the spring of 1033, she wore an emperor's ritual robes while holding the imperial clan sacrifices in the Zhao clan temple. Prior to Liu, only the usurper, Wu Zetian, had ever worn the ritual clothing of an emperor. Despite Liu's abuse of power in the ritual area, her biography in the official dynastic history of the Song describes her as alert and perceptive by nature and that despite her lowly origin she managed to gain sufficient education to enable her to understand the affairs of state. According to the *History of the Song Dynasty*, 'Renzong had become emperor but was still young and the dowager empress had assumed the regency. Although governance issued from the women's quarters, still her words of command were just and discerning; and her grace and majesty reached to the world.'¹³

Empress Dowager Gao (1031-1093), principal consort of Yingzong (1063-1067), was the second regent in the Song to rule with *de facto* power. Gao was descended of prominent lineages on both sides of her family.¹⁵ Her paternal great-grandfather was a Regional Commandant, a trusted commander under both the second and third emperors and who had been given the title of King of Wei. Her grandfather had been given the title of King of Chu and her father had the title of King of Lu. Her maternal grandfather was founding general Cao Bin. Her mother was the sister of the previous empress, Cao (empress of Renzong). The former Empress Cao had brought her young niece into the palace to be the principal consort of Yingzong; the two grew up in the palace together. The couple was very close and Gao gave birth to all of Yingzong's children who were the only ones with biographies in the official dynastic history.

Gao was named empress when her husband succeeded to the throne at the age of thirty-one. Unfortunately, he was not a well man and died four years later. Gao was the only principal consort, in the Northern Song, to have her own natural son, Shenzong (r.1068-1086), succeed as emperor. Her career as empress and empress dowager was undistinguished and it was not until she became regent for her grandson, Emperor Zhezong (r.1086-1101) that she took a prominent role in court affairs. The young emperor had succeeded his father, Shenzong, at the age of nine and his grandmother, Grand Empress Dowager Gao, became regent.

Gao had disagreed with her son's policies of reform and with his unshakable faith in Wang Anshi (1021-1086) but she had little influence over her son even though they were very close. She was finally able to put her own ideas into effect when her son died and she became regent. Her first act was to recall the conservative Sima Guang to the capital to head the government. Sima Guang had withdrawn from court as he was opposed to the reform policies of Shenzong and Wang Anshi. With the assistance

of Sima Guang and his followers, Gao successfully reversed the measures of the previous reign. Historians praise Gao as a sage among women for her use of officials and her curb of maternal relatives.

The young emperor, Zhezong, was unhappy during Gao's regency. He had adored his father and sympathized with the reformers who had nominated him as heir. He disliked the conservatives who exerted pressure on him to continue their anti-reform policies. He was further antagonized by his domineering grandmother's choice of a principal consort for him when he was enamored of another palace woman, Liu (d.1114). Therefore, when Gao died, the young emperor immediately exiled the conservatives and returned the followers of Wang Anshi to power. He conferred the chief ministry upon an ardent disciple of Wang Anshi.

Both regents who governed as *de facto* rulers, Empress Dowagers Liu and Gao, were resented by the emperors who chafed under their regencies. After Liu's death, Renzong found that Liu had pretended to be his biological mother and that his real biological mother had remained a low ranking palace woman all her life. He was outraged at her deception and his anger was only appeased after he opened the coffin of his biological mother and found that she had died of natural causes and had been properly dressed and interred as befitting the mother of an emperor. However, Renzong still demoted all of Liu's relatives and those who were considered to be her followers and promoted all her critics. Gao also had many enemies who tried to punish her after her death. These enemies tried to persuade the emperor to demote her posthumously and to reduce to commoner status all members of her clan. The emperor had signed the edict for these actions but tore it up after his titular mother, Empress Dowager Xiang, tearfully begged him to destroy the edict. The emperor then vented his anger on his empress, Meng¹⁶ (1077-1135), who was chosen for him by his grandmother and demoted her to

commoner status, sending her to the nunnery.

Regent Who Ruled Keeping Low Profile

Empress Dowager Cao (1017-1079)¹⁷ was selected as replacement empress after Renzong had deposed Empress Meng. Her grandfather was Cao Ben, the founding general who had served the first three emperors. She was well accepted by officials even when she assisted Renzong in governance during his illness. Cao's official biography in the History of the Song, *Songshi*, credits her with saving the emperor's life during an uprising of palace guards. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know whether she was responsible as this same act was recorded, in both the dynastic history as well as in other texts, crediting Renzong's favorite, Lady Zhang, with saving the emperor's life. Zhang's heroic action was given as the reason for her promotion to Imperial Consort status.¹⁸ She was also posthumously named Empress Zhang Wencheng (d.1054).

Empress Dowager Cao was asked by the officials to be regent for the emperor, Yingzong¹⁹ (r.1063-1067), who was often ill. As regent, Cao ruled behind the lowered screen assuming no imperial prerogatives. She kept a low profile and attended to business in small halls. The councilors would first call on the emperor in the audience hall, then call on the regent in a rear hall. They would tell her what had been discussed with the emperor and let her have the final say. Despite her keeping a low profile and her willingness to listen to the officials, she was not willing to retire when Yingzong recovered and wished to resume his reign. She refused to relinquish her power even though memorials were written asking for her retirement. Finally, an outspoken critic of the regent asked that the screen be removed while the court was in session. Cao was forced to flee and her retirement was effectively obtained. Four years later, Yingzong became ill again and abdicated in favor of his 20-year-old son, Shenzong (r.1067-1085). Despite the fact that Cao's regency was comparatively short, she was praised in history for insisting that no favors be granted to members of her family.

Regents Who Ensured the Succession

The two regents who were credited with protecting the dynasty by ensuring that the succession did not cause problems were Empress Dowager Xiang²⁰ (1045-1101), and Empress Dowager Meng²¹ (1077-1135). Both women were chosen by Shenzong's mother, Empress Dowager Gao. Xiang is credited with having insisted on the succession of Huizong despite forces supporting other candidates. Meng is credited with supporting Huizong's surviving son (Guangzong) to succeed, and in so doing, ensured the rule of the Zhao imperial family for another 150 years. Both these women were from illustrious families; Empress Xiang's great grandfather, Xiang Minchong (948-1019) had served as chief counselor to Emperor Zhenzong and Meng was the granddaughter of a Defense Commandant.

Empress Dowager Xiang's greatest contribution to the Song dynasty took place when Zhezong died after ruling for 15 years. Xiang called the councilors to the palace and told them of the emperor's death and that since he had no surviving sons a decision had to be made concerning the succession. The councilors had different opinions and preferences. Xiang said that all Shenzong's sons were qualified, but that Shenzong's eldest surviving son had sick eyes and so was not suitable. Xiang supported Huizong (1100-1125) to succeed and repeatedly said that he was intelligent and that none of the brothers could compare with him. She also said that he was compassionate by nature and that the previous emperor had thought that Huizong would have a long and prosperous life.²²

The second regent to ensure continuation of the imperial line was Empress Meng who is credited with rallying support for the founding emperor of Southern Song. Meng had been deposed by her husband and sent to a Daoist nunnery. She survived when the Jurchen Jin sacked the capital as she was not living within the palace. The Jin installed a former Song official named Zhang Bangchang (1081-1127) as puppet emperor of a new dynasty they named 'Chu.' In order to

gain legitimacy, Zhang appointed the last remaining Song senior widow, Meng, as regent. Two months later, Meng learned that one of Huizong's sons, Prince Kang, had escaped capture. Meng declared him the legitimate emperor and resigned from her regency for Zhang Bangchang. Prince Kang declared himself Emperor Gaozong and named Meng the Empress Dowager. The Song court, now presided over by Gaozong, moved south and eventually established its capital at Lin'an (present-day Hangzhou).

Regents During Times of Defeat

Empress Dowager Xie²³ (1210-1283), was the granddaughter of Xie Shenfu who had passed his *jinshi* examination in 1166 and had served several emperors of the Southern Song. When it was learned that the Xie family had fallen on hard times after the death of their father, the Empress Dowager summoned the daughters into the palace as consorts for Emperor Lizong. At that time, Lady Xie was the only unmarried daughter in the family and her brothers were very anxious that she be sent even though she was not good looking and was said to be blind in one eye. Lady Xie was not Lizong's choice as Empress as he was enamored of another palace woman, Lady Jia (d.1247)²⁴, but the Empress Dowager insisted and Lizong agreed and Lady Xie was named Empress.

Xie was highly intellectual, literate and gifted. She did not interfere in court affairs but she was very courageous. Upon the death of her husband, the adopted heir, Emperor Duzong (r.1264-1274) succeeded to the throne but left the conduct of state affairs in the hands of Jia Sidao (1127-1279). When Duzong died at the age of thirty-four, his four-year-old son Gongdi (r.1274-1276) was chosen to succeed him and Grand Empress Dowager Xie, as senior widow, became regent. Historians say that 'Empress Dowager Xie's regency was acceptable to the men of the outer court as she was able to have input into decision making at the highest level for fifteen years before her regency. Despite her having lived in the inner palaces for three decades, she had been both circumspect and courageous. She was able

to ensure that public policy would not unduly alarm the masses and result in a dangerous hysteria that would benefit the Mongols.’²⁵

When she approached fifty, she opposed the recommendation that the capital be moved to the coast as the Mongols had launched an intensive attack against Sichuan. She said that the masses would be alarmed and the move would cause hysteria that would only benefit the enemy. In 1274, Lizong’s adopted heir, Duzong (r.1264-1274) died leaving three sons ranging in age from three to five years of age. Xie, as senior widow and regent recommended that the four-year-old son of Empress Quan,²⁶ Gongdi (r.1275), be named as successor. In the face of continued attacks by the Mongols, Xie tried to summon loyalists to help defend the capital. After the Mongols massacred the population of some of the conquered areas, she wanted to prevent further bloodshed. She offered more concessions to the Mongols until it led to unconditional surrender. Before doing so, she arranged for generals and loyal ministers to take their forces and escort the two brothers of Gongdi and their biological mothers and maternal uncles out of the capital.

When the Mongols attacked the capital, the two senior widows, Grand Empress Dowager Xie and Empress Dowager Quan, remained at the capital to negotiate surrender terms. The final unconditional surrender pleaded only for the lives of the people of Hangzhou, the Song House, and the Song ancestral temples. Concurrently, edicts were issued to the entire Song Empire to cease fighting. On February 21, 1276, the young Song emperor assembled a few officials to make obeisance to the North, the direction of the Mongol capital.

After the surrender terms had been arranged, all royal captives were taken north, but since the Empress Dowager Xie was ill she remained behind until she recovered; instead, her daughter-in-law, Empress Dowager Quan led the captives, princesses, imperial concubines, and relatives. On the way, they met with Song loyalists who tried to free them but Quan ordered them to accept the terms of

surrender. The entourage travelled for two months and arrived at the Mongol capital, Dadu. They went to the Yuan emperor's summer residence and were stripped of their titles after a grand feast. Xie was given tax free property in Dadu where she lived until her death. Quan was a Buddhist and lived out her life as a nun. In 1228, Gongdi was ordered to go to Tibet to become a Lama priest. When he learned he had once been the emperor of Song, he wrote a patriotic poem that came to the attention of the Yuan emperor and Gongdi was ordered to commit suicide.²⁷

Conclusion

The non-Han empresses followed the female warrior tradition of their homelands whereas the ethnic Han empresses, living a sedentary lifestyle, did not take up arms but concentrated on the traditional role of being a mother of the people. Both types of empresses lived and coped as needed in the circumstances they found themselves in, whether it be war against the Song, or representing the emperors in acknowledging defeat to the victors.

Part IV

1279 C.E.-1368 C.E.

Chapter Nine

The Rule of Mongols and their Impact on China

The Mongols unified China by conquering the Xi Xia, the Jin (Gold), and the Song. They established the Yuan Dynasty in 1279. It was the first time non-Hans, directly from Inner Asia, conquered and ruled all of China instead of only Northern China.¹ The one million Mongols now had to govern seventy-million Han Chinese, ten million Manchurians and Koreans as well as a million Central Asians. To do so, they developed policies that would preserve and protect their power and culture but were racist in nature and so were unpopular with the population. Revolts broke out all over China. After ruling China for only eighty-nine years, the Mongols were pushed back to their homelands. A new Han Chinese regime took over as the Ming Dynasty in 1368.

The Forebears of the Yuan Dynasty

The Mongols were first mentioned in Chinese history during the Tang dynasty. At that time, it was a small and insignificant tribe whose confederation had been destroyed by the Jurchen and other nomadic attacks. After a civil war, the Mongols became further fragmented and they no longer had a Khan. In the thirteenth century, they were united under Genghis Khan (1167-1227) who conquered and created a Mongol Empire. By the end of his life, the Mongol Empire occupied a substantial portion of Central Asia. After his death, his descendants built on this foundation and created the largest contiguous empire of 13.8 million square miles with more than 100 million people.²[\[View Map\]](#)

The Mongol system of inheritance gave each son a portion when he married. It was the youngest son's responsibility to take care of the aged parents. Thus, he received the largest share—which included both land and animals. At marriage, the man's family paid a hefty bride-price, to compensate the bride's family for the loss of her labor. After marriage, she became a member of the husband's family and might even inherit after her husband's death. The Mongols, like many nomadic societies, practiced 'levirate,' the marrying of the widow to her deceased husband's brother, uncle, or son provided it is not her biological son.

Succession in the Mongol Empire

The Mongols did not have a firm fraternal/lineal succession. Each faction vying for leadership would present a case for itself and point out the defects in their rivals. The right to rule also had to be maintained by military power—the ability to defeat any rivals—and so military success justified irregular successions. The principal wife of the previous Khan would act as regent and rule until a successor was determined. This succession system meant that the Mongols had problems passing a united empire to the sons and grandsons of the founder.³

When pressured to name his successor, Genghis wanted to name his eldest son, Jochi. But his second son (Chagatai) objected to Jochi's paternity as their mother had been kidnapped, held captive for several months, then had returned pregnant. It was uncertain if Jochi was the biological son of Genghis Khan. Genghis made clear, at a tribal meeting, that Jochi was his legitimate first born son; but, in order not to split the empire he would not name either of the first two sons as successor. Instead, he named the third son, Ögedei. Jochi was given lands in the Siberian steppes; his descendants later ruled the area called the Golden Horde (1378-1440s) in present day Russia.⁴ The second son was given most of the Central Asian states and northern Iran. The youngest son, Tolouï, following Mongol tradition, was given the Mongol homeland. He gave each of his elder three sons, 4,000 'original' Mongol troops⁵ while his youngest son received 101,000. Each son was to recognize the sovereignty of the chosen successor, Ögedei, who was made Great Khan and given command over his brothers.

Ögedei's death created another succession problem as his principal wife, Toregene⁶ wanted her own son to succeed. As regent, she was able to distribute gifts to influential people to buy support for her son. It took her four years to ensure the succession of her son, Güyük, as he had made powerful enemies. Güyük died after a short two-year reign and his widow also tried to control the succession but

failed. Seeing the death of Güyük as an opportunity, Sorghaghtani Beki⁷(d.1252), the Nestorian Christian widow of Tolui, was able to maneuver the succession in favor of her son, Mongke (r.1251-1259). Beki's reputation for loyalty was used to show the qualifications of her sons to the empire's highest offices and eventually all her four sons became kings—Möngke, Kublai, Huglagu (Persia), and Ariq Boke (d.1266). Möngke succeeded as Khan and had the regent, Güyük's widow, placed in a sack and drowned.

In 1259, the Great Khan Möngke died and his brother, Kublai Khan, stopped battling Song China and rushed back to have himself elected Khan (1260). The youngest brother, Ariq Boke, commander of the Mongol homelands, also had himself elected Khan at another council. Civil war broke out and eventually split the Mongol Empire into virtually independent Khanates but Ariq Boke was captured in 1264 and died two years later.

Conquest of China

Genghis first organized his army to invade Xi Xia as it was closer to the Mongolian lands. In 1215, Genghis also besieged, captured and sacked the Jurchen Jin capital. The Jin tried to resist but when the Mongols attacked the capital the emperor fled south. An allied army of Song and Mongols looted the capital and the reigning emperor committed suicide to avoid being captured. The retreating Jin army returned to their homeland. Years later, the Jurchen returned to conquer China under the changed name of Manchu and established the Qing dynasty.

After the Mongols had conquered Xi Xia and the Jin, Möngke increased raids on the Song border and Song frontier officials were invited to defect (1254). But while conducting the war in Sichuan he had dysentery and died. The Mongols had to return to their Homeland to elect the next Great Khan and so the war against the Song Dynasty stopped for twenty years. After Kublai was elected the Great Khan, he returned to attack the Southern Song. During the invasions, he made a silk banner with the message that the people's lives would be spared if they surrendered. His senior wife, Chabi⁸ (1227–1281), was his advisor and prevented him from converting farmland to grazing land in order not to alienate his Chinese subjects. Kublai established the Yuan Dynasty in 1279.

The Yuan Dynasty⁹

The Mongols, who had never governed Han Chinese before their conquest of China found themselves to be a miniscule minority ruling a gigantic majority Han Chinese population. According to the census in 1290, there were four categories of people:

- Mongols: 1 million;
- Semu - western and central Asians: 1 million;
- Khitai/Hanren - Northern Chinese who have had experience of being ruled by non-Han and may have intermarried with non-Hans and so have mixed blood; Manchurians and Koreans: 10 million;
- Nanren, who were the southern Chinese who have had little experience of rule by non-Hans: 60 million.

The Mongols were faced with two issues: the first was that of trust. Could they trust the Chinese officials and maintain a dual system of government, and allow the Chinese to rule their own people under their own laws as did other non-Han regimes. The second issue was fear of assimilation. As the Mongols became a settled population could they, as a miniscule minority, absorb this huge Chinese majority; or, would the Mongols be assimilated by the Chinese and lose their own cultural traditions.

To combat the first issue of trust, the Mongols decided not to have a dual system of government. Instead, they employed a single system of government with a hierarchy of ranked ethnic preference groups to maintain control. The Mongols and their Semu allies held about thirty percent of all official positions, including most of the top military and civil offices. They also had a virtual monopoly on positions in the Imperial Guard from which officials are promoted. Even when the civil examinations were revived, the percentages of degrees awarded to the Han Chinese remained small as the Mongols and the Semu had easier tests. There was a large gap between the Mongolian elites and the Chinese as all Mongolian imperial relatives enjoyed hereditary political, economic and military privileges.¹⁰ The Mongol elite found little incentive to learn Chinese. This institutional

racism caused great resentment among the Han Chinese.

To combat the second issue of assimilation, the Mongols mandated that the Chinese follow Mongol traditions. The first was that of levirate in which the widow was to remarry the husband's male relatives, including his son. Another Mongol practice the Chinese woman had to follow was that of the dowry. The Mongol tradition was that on marriage, the dowry was given to the husband's family who had already paid a large bride price made up of years of labor as well as gifts of animals. This practice was workable for the Mongol woman as she was absorbed into her husband's family and had the right to inherit. Unfortunately for the Chinese woman, she did not have the right to inherit from her husband's family. Under this practice, the Chinese woman became economically destitute and was dependent on the good will of her in-laws.

Succession Problems

Succession was a problem for the Yuan Dynasty, and caused many internal struggles. The reigns of the Yuan emperors were short and marked by intrigues and rivalries. Within its ninety-seven years of rule, nine Khans ascended the throne after Kublai Khan's death in 1294, averaging eight years per Khan in the 74 years between 1294 and the end of the Yuan in 1368. Changes in rulers and power struggles resulted in bureaucratic turnover and reversals of state policies. These conflicts in court diverted the government's attention from problems in the provinces such as misrule, famine, and peasant discontent. Uninterested in administration, the Mongol rulers were separated from both the army and the populace. China was torn by dissension and unrest; outlaws ravaged the country without interference from the weakening Yuan armies.

Palace Women in the Yuan Dynasty

According to Marco Polo, the Yuan palaces had many palace women; 'He, Kublai has four wives of the first rank, who are esteemed legitimate They bear equally the title of empress, and have their

separate courts. None of them have fewer than three hundred young female attendants of great beauty, together with a multitude of youths as pages, and other eunuchs, as well as ladies of the bedchamber, so that the number of persons belonging to each of their respective court amounts to ten thousand.’¹¹

The Mongols, being from the steppes, intermarried with other ethnic groups and so there were many kinds of women in the inner palace. There were also captive women as well as women sent as tribute from countries such as Korea. Before 1275, Korean women were captives. Between 1275 and 1335, a thousand five hundred Korean women were sent as tribute to the Mongol court. Many of the Korean women were sent together with Korean eunuchs. These women worked in the palaces and those who found favor became imperial consorts.¹² Official history of the Yuan shows that one Korean woman, Qiwanzhohudu (c.1370), became the empress of Huizong (r.1333-1370). Korean records show more Korean women becoming imperial consorts. Another Korean woman, née Lu (c.1370), was also Huizong’s consort. Wuzong (r.1307-1311) had a consort named Jindamashili (c. 1310), who, after his death, became a consort to Renzong (r.1311-1320). Wangboyanhudu (c.1320) was said to have also been an empress of Yuan Renzong.¹³

Powerful Women in the Yuan

The Mongols did not practice patrilineal succession and so did not require regents for underage emperors. However, keeping with the nomadic tradition of succession, Mongol rulers were selected through a convention of Mongol princes in their homeland. A great Khan was selected from the contenders who had the greatest claim and the greatest military strength. This required time for the different tribes to gather and a regent was required to rule until the next great khan was elected. There were three great regents: Kokejin, Empress Bulukhan, and Empress Budashiri.

Kublai Khan (r.1279-1294) was the first to designate an heir.

He had chosen his second son whose wife was Kokejin (d.1301).¹⁴ Unfortunately, the heir predeceased Kublai. When Kublai was near death, the two contenders for succession were his grandson, the oldest and the youngest sons of Kokejin. The oldest son was raised by his grandmother and as an adult he was stationed at the northern borders. Kokejin had raised her youngest son and so preferred that he succeed as emperor. When Kublai died, Kokejin, the first regent of the Yuan Dynasty, immediately sent for her youngest son, the future Chengzong (r.1294-1307), to return to the capital to claim the throne. She then summoned a convention, knowing that the youngest was glib while the oldest suffered from a stammer. She said that it was Kublai's wishes that the throne go to the one who knew the wise sayings of Genghis Khan. The youngest was elected as he was able to recite the passages but the oldest could not. She was said to have had a major influence on her son's policies once he became emperor and often helped him in the administration of the empire as he was often ill.

Empress Bulughan (d.1307)¹⁵ was the second empress of Chengzong. Her grandfather had served Genghis Khan. She became very powerful in court affairs as the emperor suffered from chronic illness. A woman of ability, the Yuan dynastic history concedes that the governmental policies enacted under her influence were for the most part 'just and appropriate.' Her son was the designated heir but he predeceased his father. Fearing the loss of power at the death of her husband, she exiled the most powerful contender, the future Renzong (r.1311-1320) together with his mother. The next powerful contender, the future Wuzong (r.1307-1311) was stationed far from the capital and was not thought to be as great a threat. When Chengzong died, Bulughan prepared to assume the regency and enthrone her choice for successor. However, her enemies delayed processing the documents and waited for the return of the exiled, future Renzong. The latter returned to the capital and arrested Bulughan. He gave up his claim to the throne to his brother with the proviso that he would be named the heir-apparent. Bulughan was exiled to Hebei, was accused of committing adultery and ordered to commit suicide.

Empress Budashiri¹⁶ (d.1340), was the empress of Wenzong (r.1328, 1329-1332). She ruled as regent after the death of her husband. Her son had been named heir-apparent but he predeceased his father. No successor had been named. While Budashiri had a younger son, she did not name him as successor saying that he was too young. Instead, she named a six-year-old son of Emperor Mingzong (r.1329), who had seized the throne from Wenzong and ruled for six months in 1329. Unfortunately, the young boy died soon after he was enthroned. Budshiri then named another son of Mingzong to the throne. This young thirteen-year-old, Huizong (r.1333-1370) had been exiled by her to Korea.

Budashiri was regent for more than seven years. She had the right of acceptance or rejection in all political matters. The young emperor was very unhappy and when he had enough control of the situation he investigated the injustices suffered by his parents. He also listed the wrongs he suffered under Budashiri. In mid-1340, he stripped her of her titles, exiled her to Hebei where she was put to death. He banished her son to Korea in retaliation for what he himself had suffered during his banishment. Budashiri's son was later killed.

Regents were not the only ones who were powerful. Kublai's empress, Chabui (c.d. 1281)¹⁷ was extremely intelligent, cultured and good looking. When Kublai's elder brother, Möngke died, there was a scramble for succession to the throne. Her husband was on a military campaign; she immediately asked him to return and so he was able to be elected as the great khan. As empress, she was fully involved in affairs of state. She was able to appoint her favorites to important posts. She prevented the turning of agricultural land around the capital into pasture land for the horses. Another powerful woman was Tagi¹⁸ (c.d. 1323), the mother of two emperors and the grandmother of three. Her husband, a grandson of Kublai Khan, had died young and left her to raise two young sons. When Chengzong was near death, his empress Bulughan exiled Tagi and her son, the future Renzong to Korea. Tagi's other son was the future Wuzong. When Bulughan's plan to install her choice candidate as emperor was foiled, Tagi's two sons

succeeded each other as emperor. Tagi remained powerful during the reigns of her two sons. Her grandson, Yingzong (r.1320-1323), succeeded to the throne at the age of eighteen. He stripped her of her power and privilege and would not allow her to control him. She began to plot to get rid of him. When she failed, she fell ill and died.

The End of the Yuan

As the Mongols settled in China they lost influence among the Mongols in the rest of the Mongol Empire as those Mongols saw the Yuan rulers as too Chinese. The Chinese resented the Mongols who looked down on them. The population was unhappy that irrigation and water management projects were abandoned, resulting in famine and the flooding of the Yellow River (1334). Natural disasters, epidemics, and a deterioration of climate resulted in banditry. Rebellions arose in several regions in south and central China. The Mongols were driven back to their homelands making the Yuan one of the shortest dynasties.¹⁹

Impact of Mongol Rule on Chinese Women during the Ming and Qing

The rule of the Mongols may not have been long but their policies wreaked havoc on the lives of Chinese women for the next 543 years. The levirate marriage system, requiring a widow to remarry the deceased husband's brother, uncles, or even son (provided it was not her biological son), was a pragmatic practice for nomadic peoples who practiced cross-generational marriages as well as polygyny.²⁰ It was practical for nomads as once the woman marries into her husband's family she travels with them and no longer remains close to her birth family. Should her husband pass away, her remarriage with other male members of the family guaranteed her protection. Nomadic customs also integrated the woman into her husband's family. She became a full member and could receive a share of the husband's inheritance.

This levirate system was not acceptable to the Chinese who did not allow cross-generational marriages and regarded marriage to the husband's male relatives as incest. Another problem was that the Chinese did not practice polygyny. Therefore, a widow who was the principal wife could not marry a male relative who already had a principal wife. If she did so, she would be a concubine.²¹ In order to make this form of marriage acceptable to the Chinese, the Mongols amended the law to only require the widow to marry an unmarried brother or to remain single. They also allowed the widow not to remarry if she and her children formed a tax unit, or if her husband had joined her family to continue her family line. She could also make a public vow not to remarry, but if she broke that vow, her new marriage would be dissolved and she would be given to a relative of her deceased husband.²²

A more drastic change to the Chinese way of life was that of the dowry system. In previous dynasties, the Han Chinese woman kept her dowry and brought it into her new marriage if she was either divorced or widowed. Her children would inherit her dowry after her

death. The nomadic way of dealing with the dowry was different. Her dowry was given to her husband's family, but she could inherit upon her husband's death as she was a full member of the family upon marriage. The Han Chinese woman could never become a member of her husband's family and could not inherit from her husband's estate.²³ Without the dowry, the widow was completely dependent on her in-laws. She had to remain with them even if she was miserable. She could not return to her family as they could not support her and her dependents. Widow re-marriage, outside of her deceased husband's family, was difficult as she had no dowry. On the other hand, the in-laws could get rid of her by marrying her to another family even if it was below her status. The Yuan dowry system was to negatively impact the Chinese woman throughout the next two dynasties.²⁴

When the Ming Dynasty was established, the levirate requirement was abolished but the Mongol dowry system was kept. Throughout the Ming and the Qing the woman was economically destitute. The Yuan legacy of widow chastity, residence with the in-laws, and self-mutilation, even immolation influenced the Ming. Desperate widows committed suicide. Ming society saw widow suicide as the highest form of virtue.²⁵ The names of these women were put in shrines. In order to ensure that the honor did not only go to widows from elite families, county magistrates had to find humble commoner widows who could be honored for their virtue. The Biography of Women section in the Ming Dynastic History praised 400 such women out of 30,000 names submitted from around the country.²⁶

The situation became so bad that the Qing Government praised suicide of women resisting rape but condemned widow suicide saying that it was not due to fidelity but to despair: fear of being married off by her in-laws to an inferior remarriage; the loss of security of her children; fear of loneliness; of hardships; of abusive in-laws; of unwillingness to face the burdens of caring for a dead husband's aging parents. The unhappy widows hoped that as wandering ghosts, their spirits would return to take vengeance on those who made their lives

miserable. Qing Emperor Yongzheng, in 1729, called for a stop to using death to avoid responsibilities and said that a widow had two important responsibilities, caring for her in-laws and raising her children or adopted heirs. The pattern of suicide changed; the reported number of suicides dropped and women who committed suicide did so after they had fulfilled their responsibilities of caring for parents-in-law and children.²⁷

Part V

1368 C.E.-1912 C.E.

Chapter Ten

Late Imperial China

Late Imperial China refers to the last two dynasties, the Ming and the Qing. The founder of the Ming Dynasty was a commoner and a former Buddhist monk. The dynasty he founded lasted for two hundred and seventy-six years (1368-1644). The Ming abandoned all Mongol policies except for the treatment of the woman's dowry.¹ Towards the end of the Ming, the country was suffering from natural disasters and famine and it was racked with peasant rebellions. The Manchus, from Inner Asia, took this opportunity to attack. They conquered China with the help of a Chinese general and ruled as the last imperial dynasty of China for about two hundred and sixty-eight years. Qing did not end from invasions nor from peasant rebellions. It ended as it was drawn into modern world politics by the West, whose level of culture was in many ways equal to that of Qing China and whose technology was superior. The rebellion against the Qing was led by intellectuals who were influenced by western thought. These leaders felt that change could only occur if the foreign corrupt Manchu rulers were driven out of power.

The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)

The Ming dynasty was the last dynasty to be ruled by ethnic Han Chinese. Frustrated and angered by the institutional racism under the Mongols and driven by hunger, the population rose in rebellion under different bandit leaders.² The successful leader was a man named Zhu Yuanzhang, who was able to rally the rebels and drive out the Mongols, ending the Yuan dynasty and establishing a new one. Zhu was from a family of poor farmers who could not pay their taxes and had to move around to make a living. When he was sixteen (1344), an epidemic killed his whole family and he was given to a Buddhist monastery as a novice. In 1352, the monastery he belonged to was robbed and Zhu decided to join the rebels under a leader who thought highly of him. The leader bound Zhu to him by giving him two of his daughters as wives—his adopted daughter, surnamed Ma, and the daughter of one of his concubines. After the death of the rebel leader, Zhu took over command of the rebel forces and eventually defeated all the other rebel leaders and founded the Ming Dynasty. The adopted daughter of the rebel leader, née Ma, became the founding empress.³

The founder of the Ming rose from humble beginnings. Within eleven years he went from being a penniless monk to the most powerful warlord of the time. Within another five years he became emperor of the newly established Ming Dynasty.

The Ming Dynasty ruled for almost three centuries with sixteen emperors occupying the throne. It reunited China under Han Chinese rulers after almost 400 years of foreign invasion and occupation from the north. At the height of Ming power, it captured the Western Region, conquered the Jurchen in the northeast and governed Tibet in the southwest. The territory controlled by Ming was smaller than that of the Yuan as it did not include the Mongol homelands. Ming became more influential abroad than the Tang and reached its height of power during the first quarter of the Fifteenth century with the long voyages by Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433 or 1435).[\[View Map\]](#)^{4,5}

Zheng He was a eunuch who had helped the Ming Yongle Emperor (r.1402-1424) usurp the throne. Over three decades he conducted seven voyages trading and collecting tribute in the eastern Pacific and Indian Oceans. Zheng He's fleet followed established routes of trade between China and the Arabian Peninsula since the Han dynasty. The voyages were designed to establish a Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean and to extend the tributary system. The fleets visited Brunei, Java, Thailand, Southeast Asia, India, the Horn of Africa, and Arabia. Zheng He presented gifts of gold, silver, porcelain and silk to the leaders of these places. In return he was given gifts such as ostriches, zebras, camels, giraffes, and ivory. These voyages made Ming influential abroad.⁶

During the Sixteenth century, the Ming economy was stimulated by trade with many western nations such as the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Dutch. Trade with western nations as well as the Japanese brought in massive amounts of silver which then replaced copper and paper banknotes. Another important impact on Ming China (and also on the Manchu Qing Dynasty) was the arrival of 920 Jesuits from 1552 to 1800. The Jesuits first landed on an offshore island in 1552 and then on the mainland in 1582. They introduced Western science, mathematics, astronomy, and visual arts to the imperial court and carried on significant inter-cultural and philosophical dialogue with Chinese scholars. At the time of their peak influence, they were considered some of the emperor's most valued and trusted advisors, holding many prestigious posts in the imperial government. Many Chinese scholars adopted Christianity. By the end of the Ming all of the members of the imperial household were Christian converts and the Empress Dowager, wife of the father of Emperor Yongli (r.1546-1662), baptized as Helena (c.1662), sent a letter to Pope Innocent X (1574-1655), asking for his prayers for the Ming cause. By the time the Vatican's reply arrived several years later, the Empress Dowager and the Yongli Emperor were both dead.⁷

The Early Ming and Succession Problems

When the founder died, thirty-eight of his forty concubines were killed and buried with him to serve him in the afterlife according to non-Han traditions.⁸ Since the founder's son, heir to the throne, had predeceased him, the founder's last edict named his grandson, son of the deceased heir, as his successor. The grandson ascended the throne in 1398, at the age of twenty-one. As emperor, he tried to reduce the power of the princes and they began to rebel and his uncle, later known as Emperor Yongle, usurped the throne. Yongle was the eldest son of the founding emperor but was not the son of the Empress. As such, he was not the heir. Yongle's usurpation was referred to as the 'Second Founding' of the Ming. The new emperor wanted to choose his second son as heir; but on the advice of his ministers, he named his eldest son by his principal consort. Emperor Hongxi (r.1424-5) was a scholar, not a soldier like his younger brothers, so the brothers plotted against him and he suddenly passed away in his palace at the age of forty-seven. Hongxi's eldest son, born of his empress, was designated as heir and succeeded his father.

The Power of Eunuchs⁹

The Ming founder had decreed that no women from powerful families be recruited into the palaces. All imperial wives were to be recruited from the common people in order to prevent maternal relatives from grasping power. They were also afraid of paternal relatives usurping the throne. The only allies the emperors could look to for support were the officials or eunuchs. Having grown up in the palaces, surrounded by eunuchs, the emperors' tendency was to put their trust in the eunuchs. Zheng He was not the only important eunuch during the Ming as eunuchs commanded armies and participated in matters of appointment and promotion of officials.

The eunuchs developed their own bureaucracy that was parallel to, and not subject to, the civil service. Emperor Wanli (r.1572-1620) granted them power to collect provincial taxes. During

the reign of the Tianqi Emperor (r.1620-1627) a powerful eunuch had his political rivals tortured to death and had temples built in his own honor throughout the Empire. He built personal palaces from funds allocated for building the previous emperor's tombs. His friends and family gained important positions despite the fact that they had no qualifications. The Chongzhen Emperor (r.1627-1644) had this eunuch dismissed from court but the eunuch problem continued until the fall of the Empire.

The End of the Ming

During the last decades of the Ming, trade decreased and the flow of silver into China diminished greatly, undermining state revenues. This damage to the Ming economy was compounded by natural disasters, crop failure, and sudden epidemics. By the early half of the seventh century, rebellions were widespread due to famines, tax increases, and natural disasters such as flooding and earthquakes. The military fell apart as it was caught between the Manchu raiders from the north and the peasant rebels in the provinces. A peasant rebel leader, Li Zicheng (1606-45), captured the capital and the last Ming emperor hung himself in the imperial garden. Li declared himself emperor of a new dynasty. The Manchus chose this opportunity to cross the Great Wall and a Ming border general, Wu Sangui (1612-1678) allied with the Mongols and opened the gates at Shanhai Pass for them to enter China. Wu entered the capital, together with the Manchu army, and a new Manchu Qing Dynasty was proclaimed. Scattered Ming loyalists still existed after 1644 including those of Zheng Chenggong (1624-1662) who took his forces to Taiwan. The Manchus finally defeated all the Ming loyalists in 1662.¹⁰

The Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)¹¹

Nurhaci (1559-1626), the founder of the Manchu state, was of Jurchen ethnicity. He was educated in the Confucian classics as he was the son of a noble family and was a hostage in the household of a Ming general. Beginning in 1609 he increased his power by dominating neighboring Jurchen and Mongol tribes. He united the tribes using traditional methods such as marriage alliances and the Chinese tributary system (the acknowledgement of each other through the giving of gifts). To establish legitimacy as the descendant of the earlier Jurchen Jin rulers, he declared himself the ruler of a second Jurchen dynasty, the Later Jin (Gold) dynasty. He organized his troops and their families into eight banners.¹²

His son and successor, Hong Taiji (r.1626-1643), consolidated the Empire and changed the name of the dynasty from the Later Jin to Qing in 1636. Nurhaci had changed their tribal name from Jurchen to Manchu; Hong Taiji further institutionalized the name by forbidding the people to call themselves Jurchen. He made the tribes subordinate themselves to the dynasty by removing the senior leaders of the banners, reducing banner autonomy. He created four additional banners – three Mongol and one Han Chinese. These new banners were attached directly to the Central Government. Later, he added another eight Mongol banners comprised of the conquered Mongol tribes and another eight Han Chinese banners (those who had gone over to the Manchus in, or before, 1644). The eventual conquest of China was achieved by these twenty-four banners in which less than sixteen percent of the soldiers were of Manchu origin.

The early Qing rulers claimed descent from both Manchus and Mongols and preferred intermarriage with the Mongols, especially with the direct descendants of Genghis Khan. They tied the Han Chinese banners to themselves by allowing Manchu intermarriage with those in the Han Chinese banners but not with the rest of the Han Chinese population. The Qing rulers focused on preserving their lineage and culture but also promoted the cultures of the many

different peoples they ruled. Most Qing rulers were multilingual; they studied Mongolian, Manchu and Chinese. Some even learned Tibetan and Uighur. Like all non-Han rulers, they incorporated Han-type bureaucracies but at the same time they changed the Chinese model to suit their own circumstances.

They concentrated on controlling an empire with different races across Inner and East Asia. Different laws were applied to different peoples and officials were recruited from the different groups. As a non-Han dynasty, Qing adopted ideas of ruler-ship from the cultures of their subject peoples. The Qing emperor was also referred to as the ‘Great Khan.’ He was identified as the ruler of five peoples—Manchu, Mongol, Tibetans, Uighurs and Chinese. These five languages were recognized as the official languages.

In order to assimilate the majority Han population, the Qing required all to adopt Manchu hairdo and dress styles. The Edict in 1638 decreed that men who bound up their hair in the Ming style would be scalped and put to death and that women who bound their feet would have their feet cut off.¹³ While the government was successful in implementing the hair dressing code for men—shaving their foreheads and wearing a queue (pigtail) to comply with the Manchu custom—they were never successful in implementing the edict regarding women as the women were indoors. The government had to give up on ending foot-binding. Instead Manchu men grew to like the tiny feet. Manchu women were forbidden to bind their feet but they began to wear special shoes designed for them to walk as if they had bound feet. Changes were also made to the Manchu way of life and they were no longer allowed to practice levirate marriage but were to adopt the Chinese marriage practice of serial monogamy with concubinage. Funeral practices were changed from cremation to burial, filial piety was raised to new heights and the Confucian classics were used in civil service examinations. The rulers patronized Chinese art and literature.

Succession

Nurhaci left a will giving a banner to each of his three sons by his third empress. It was also rumored that he had named his son, Dodo (1612-1650), as heir. The older sons, not born of the third empress, were afraid that she and her three sons would dominate the government. They forced the third empress to commit suicide and be buried with Nurhaci. Instead of giving banners to all three of her sons, banners were only given to two of the sons leaving the youngest son without one because of his youth. During the struggles over succession, the eighth son, Hong Taiji, seized authority by seizing the banner for Aiige, twelfth son of Nurhaci, for himself and then asking the eldest and most powerful of the sons to lead the banner leaders in electing Hong Taiji as the successor.

Succession problems continued to plague the Manchus as Hong Taiji's death started another succession crisis. When banner nobles and officials met to elect his successor some preferred the fraternal succession system as Dorgon (1612-1650), a great military leader, was supported by a number of banner leaders. The Chinese officials supported lineal succession and the eldest son was a major contender. Both candidates had equal numbers of banners and so rival claims split the Manchu elite. A compromise was reached in which the five-year old son of Hong Taiji, Fulin (Shunzhi: r.1643-1661), instead of the eldest, was named emperor with Dorgon as co-regent. Dorgon consolidated his personal power and removed his co-regent. Dorgon then ruled as regent from 1644 until his death (1650). It was rumored that under the levirate form of marriage he had married Hong Taiji's widow, Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang¹⁴ (1613-1688), of the lineage of Genghis Khan. She was the mother of the young emperor. The young emperor disliked Dorgon and after Dorgon's death posthumously stripped him of his titles. Dorgon was rehabilitated during the reign of Kangxi (r.1661-1722).

The succession problem again reared its ugly head after the Emperor Shunzhi died of smallpox when he was only in his twenties. However, he had foreseen problems and had designated an heir, a younger son, later known as Emperor Kangxi. It was said that the

young boy was selected as he had survived smallpox and was expected to live a long life. The emperor also selected four regents as Kangxi was not yet seven *sui*. Power was in the hands of the four regents and his grandmother, the Grand Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang. Soon, the fourth regent, Oboi (c.1610-1669), took over and in his eight years in office became as powerful as Dorgon had been. In 1669, when Kangxi was fifteen years old, his grandmother, who had raised him, helped him to have Oboi arrested and take control and rule in his own right as emperor. Kangxi is known as one of the greatest emperors in Chinese history; his reign of sixty-one years makes him the longest-reigning Emperor of China.¹⁵

To avoid succession problems, Kangxi followed the Chinese tradition and installed his first son by the Empress as heir but later found him unfit for office and demoted him. In so doing, a fierce power struggle began among the other sons for the position of heir and Kangxi said, 'At my deathbed some of you will fight each other for the throne, swinging your swords over my corpse!' After Kangxi's death, the fourth son announced that he was his father's dying choice and declared himself Emperor Yongzheng (r.1722-1735). As emperor, he arrested those brothers whom he suspected would not support him and announced that in the future the name of the successor would be placed in a sealed box to be opened upon the death of the emperor.

The rejection of the eldest-son succession principle meant that of the eleven emperors who ruled from 1644-1911, only one was the son of an empress.¹⁶ The secret naming of the heir, to be announced after the emperor's death, resulted in fierce succession struggles between the brothers, with the victor exterminating his rivals. This also meant that there would be a number of empress dowagers for, instead of only giving the title to the previous empress, the new emperor would also name his birth mother as empress dowager.

The End of the Qing

The two Opium wars with the West (1839-1842 and

1856-1860), the internal rebellions such as the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) and the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901) made the Qing government weak politically and economically. The population explosion created social and economic problems which the government was unable to deal with. The reformers had first tried to establish a constitutional monarchy, like that in Japan and in England. When this effort failed and Emperor Guangxu (1875-1908), who had been working with the reformers, was imprisoned by Empress Dowager Cixi, (1835–1908), the reformers decided to form a new republic.¹⁷

By 1908, both Cixi and Emperor Guangxu died leaving a powerless and unstable central authority. The successor, Puyi (1906-1967), was only two years old. Inspired by western ideas of nationalism and by the development of a Han identity it became impossible for the Chinese to accept foreign Manchu rulers. In 1912, Empress Dowager Longyu (1868-1913), wife of Emperor Guangxu and niece of Empress Dowager Cixi, negotiated with the rebels and issued an imperial edict to abdicate the child emperor. Thus ended over 2,000 years of imperial China.

Palace Women in Late Imperial China

The organization of palace women in the Ming and the Qing was similar to that of the Song with slight changes in the number of ranks and titles.¹ The recruitment of women into the palaces was, however, very different. While other ethnic Han dynasties recruited their women from among allies or high ranking families, the Ming only recruited women from among the commoners for fear of the domination of powerful elite families through the marriage of their women into the imperial line. The newly recruited palace women and their families had opportunities for advancement but the women were subject to harsh discipline within the palace. One of the punishments began in the early evening when the gates of the palaces were locked. The woman being punished had to walk from the Qianqing Palace² to the Rijing Gate,³ then back to the Qianqing gate by way of the Yuehua Gate.⁴ As she went, she was required to ring a bell and cry out, ‘the Empire is at peace.’ The punishment was carried out regardless of weather.⁵

The Ming was unique among the ethnic Han dynasties to have foreign women as the emperor’s consorts. The founding emperor was said to have had captive Mongol women in his palace. In 1408, eunuchs sent by the Yongle Emperor arrived at the court of the Korean king and demanded that beautiful young girls be selected from the families of Korean civil and military officials as well as from families of ordinary soldiers. The Korean court was then forced to periodically send women as tribute to the court of the Chinese Emperor up through the reign of the Xuande Emperor (1425-1435).⁶ In 1409, five Korean women were installed as consorts to the emperor.⁷ Lady Quan (d.1410) won the emperor’s favor because of her musical abilities. Her father was a library clerk in a ministry in Korea. She was selected at the age of eighteen. When the empress passed away, she was assigned to manage the affairs of the interior palaces. She died within a year while accompanying the emperor on his expedition against the

Mongols.⁸ In 1409, five Korean women were installed as consorts to the Chinese emperor.⁹

The recruitment of palace women in the Qing was different from the Ming. Non-Han dynasties, the Yuan and the Qing, married women to solidify alliances. The Manchu Qing imperial family wanted to claim legitimacy through tracing their right to rule from the earlier Mongol Yuan dynasty and so preferred to marry Mongolian women, especially those descended from Genghis Khan.

According to records, there were between fifty and one hundred female members of the imperial family living in the palace at any given time. The western observer, Alvaro Semedo, estimates that there were 3,000 women and 12,000 eunuchs in about 1626. However, the first Manchu emperor said that at the end of the Ming the palace was staffed by 9,000 women and 100,000 eunuchs. The high figures cited by the Qing dynasty may not have been correct but were exaggerated to show that the Ming was corrupt and that Heaven had taken away their Mandate to rule and given it to the new Qing dynasty.

Marriage Policy

The strategy of marriage of the Ming founder was very similar to that used by the founders of most Chinese Han dynasties; that is, to use marriage to cement alliances; especially with those who had helped him establish his new dynasty. Since the founder and his followers were commoners, the founding emperor wanted to ensure that no powerful family would take the power from the emperors who were to follow him. In the final edition of his *Ancestral Instructions*, the founder stated that the wives of imperial princes should be 'girls of good families' whose fathers held no official nor noble positions. Daughters of the rich and powerful were excluded from the selection. The purpose of the criteria used was to select healthy commoner young virgins, girls of good families, between the ages of about 10 and 20 *sui*.

The official recruitment of women for the palace was carried out when the heir and princes were ready to be married. The senior woman in the imperial family, either the empress dowager or the empress, would issue an imperial order to the Ministry of Rites, instructing the officials to begin the recruitment. A public decree specified the number of women to be selected and the regions that were to supply them. At times the recruitments were conducted in

secret as officials were often opposed to them, especially if it was to be done during a period of mourning.

The recruitment was done in phases and the first phase was overseen by the eunuchs. More than five thousand girls, between thirteen and sixteen *sui* were brought to the palace gates by their parents, who were given gifts of money as compensation. The girls were then divided into groups of one hundred for the first inspection and those who were too tall, too short, too fat, or unhealthy were dismissed. About one thousand would be sent home after the first inspection. The eunuchs would then check the ears, eyes, mouths, noses, hair, skin, waists, necks, arms, and backs. Another two thousand girls were dismissed when they did not pass the second inspection. The third inspection had the eunuchs listening to the girls' voices as they said their names and ages. If the voice was too strong, too weak, or too hesitant, they would be dismissed. Another thousand would be dismissed if their feet were too large or their behavior too reckless or hasty.

About one thousand girls would pass these inspections and they were now to be inspected by palace women. The girls were taken to a private room where they were inspected physically. Only three hundred would have passed this final inspection and all would become members of the imperial household. They were kept in the palace for one month during which time the imperial women would become familiar with their personalities and their conversational abilities. They would be judged for their strengths and weaknesses and their wisdom or lack of it. About fifty girls would pass this stage of selection—all to be consorts or concubines. These girls were then inspected by the senior imperial woman. These women were tested in writing, mathematics, poetry, painting and other arts and the three most outstanding ones would be selected. They would then again be physically inspected and presented to the emperor who would make the final decision.

The ideal chosen one would be around fifteen, with a face like

that of the goddess Guanyin. Her complexion would be like the rosy morning mist reflected in the snow, like hibiscus flowers emerging from water. Her hair like a spring cloud and her eyes like autumn waves. Her mouth like a red cherry and her nose like a perfectly shaped vase. Her teeth delicate and pure. She would have a strong chin, a broad forehead and a long neck. When she walked it would be like water flowing from a hidden spring. She was to be totally without blemish and without any sign of disease.

There were other criteria for selection of women for special duties. Wet nurses needed to have a rich supply of milk and be free from disease. Sedan chair carriers need to have natural, unbound feet and were usually recruited from poor families who could not afford to bind their daughters' feet. There was resistance to the recruitment and so most women were recruited from near the two capitals and military garrisons where there was greater control.

Outside of the formal process of recruitment, young girls whose families had fallen on hard times could be sponsored by their relatives who were already in the palace. Girls could be bought or taken by force. Women in the family of a disgraced official could be sentenced to work in the palace as punishment for crimes of their male relatives. At the beginning of the dynasty, there were captive Mongol women; later there were Korean women offered as tribute.

The families of palace women were compensated for the loss of their daughters by exemption from labor service to the state and by cash payments and salaries. Parents were paid for their literate daughters provided they were healthy. The pay would be in accordance with the rank of their daughters. It is possible that money went to the parents and the women themselves only received food, clothing, shelter and gifts.

Periodically, women who had served in the palace for a number of years would be released to make room for younger replacements. There was opposition to their release as the women knew too many palace secrets. Old women were kept inside the

palaces then sent to the Laundry Bureau outside the palace walls.

As a result of the recruitment of only girls from commoner families as per ancestral instructions, the Ming dynasty stands out as the period of time where the power of women and their relatives was at its weakest versus the Han dynasty, which stands out as the longest period in which the power of palace women and their relatives was at its highest.

In the reigns of the first four Ming emperors, the position of empress was stable and secure as the founder had decreed that only the son of the principal wife could inherit the throne. The early Ming emperors did not even appoint new empresses when their principal consorts died. They wanted to give special respect to the women who had helped them establish and consolidate their positions. They also wanted to say that just as there is only one emperor, there can be only one empress. The position of empress in the Later Ming was not secure as the emperor made sure that the principal wife chosen for him would not get pregnant so that he could depose her for being barren and name his favorite consort as empress and her son as heir.

Powerful Women in the Ming

Two empresses ruled as regents. The first, Grand Empress Dowager Zhang (d.1442) became regent to her grandson, Yingzong (r.1435-1449; 1457-1464) when he ascended the throne at the age of eight. She had assisted her husband during his short reign and was active during the reign of her son. During her regency, routine decisions were made by the officials but she had the final say on political and military decisions. Under her regency, the early years of her grandson's reign was a period of social and economic stability. Her brothers were distinguished generals and were enfeoffed as earls.¹¹

The second regent was also surnamed Zhang (d.1541). She was recruited into the palace of the heir, the future Emperor Xiaozong (r. 1487-1505). She and her husband were a loving couple and it was said that he never had relations with any other palace women. Upon

the death of her husband, her son, Wuzong (r.1505-1521) ascended the throne at the age of fourteen. When her son died at the age of twenty-nine, without an heir, the Empress Dowager Zhang, in consultation with the Grand Secretary installed her son's thirteen-year-old cousin as Shizong (1521-1567). The new emperor honored his biological mother as Holy Mother and changed Zhang's title to Imperial Aunt. When Zhang's status declined, her brothers were imprisoned and executed. Zhang died of illness in her late sixties.¹²

An imperial consort could become powerful within the inner palaces if she gained the favor of important persons. An example is Lady Wan (d.1487). She had entered the palace as a maid at the age of three as her father was convicted of a crime and was exiled. Growing up in the palace, she became sexually involved with the heir, the future Emperor Xianzong (r.1465-1487). She was about seventeen years older than the young man. Lady Wan gave birth to the emperor's first son and was promoted to Honored Consort. Unfortunately, her son did not survive the first year. She then did not allow any palace women's pregnancies to come to term by having her agents induce abortions and miscarriages. Concerned that there would be no heir to the throne, a eunuch kept one of the pregnancies secret, and after he was born the child was given to his grandmother, the empress dowager to raise. The young boy, aged six, was warned never to eat or drink in Lady Wan's quarters.¹³

Ordinary palace women could also become very powerful, such as Madam Ke (d.1627). She was the nursemaid to the Emperor Xizong (r.1620-1627). The young man became emperor at the age of fifteen when his father died after having spent over one month on the throne. His biological mother had also died when he was fourteen. On becoming emperor, the young boy gave his nursemaid and her family titles and honors. Madam Ke was very friendly with the eunuchs and during his rule, it was known that the power was in the hands of Madam Ke and her eunuch ally. When the emperor married, Madam Ke was told to leave his palace but she was returned as the emperor could not be without her. She was said to have been responsible for

the abortion and miscarriages of the palace women. When she was criticized, it was her critics who were punished. The emperor died at the age of twenty-one without an heir and was succeeded by his younger brother. Madam Ke was sent to work in the laundry where she was said to have been beaten to death.¹⁴

Imperial Women

At the beginning of the Ming, imperial women had great freedom of movement and the founding empress had assisted her husband in military activities, the decisions he made in institutional matters, in managing his civil and military subordinates as well as in the management of his household. She influenced his decisions on a wide range of issues from the punishment of senior officials and merchants whom he suspected of treason to the treatment of prisoners forced to do corvée labor. She took a personal interest in the welfare of the students at the National University at Nanjing, and sponsored the setting up of the Granary to give grain as part of the stipend for the students and their families. The wife of the third emperor, Yongle, Empress Xu (1362-1407), would ascend the city walls and personally encourage the troops while her husband was pursuing his campaigns.

While palace women could gain power through close relationships with the emperor, they were constantly exposed to danger. Consort Guo (d.1393), a secondary consort of the founding emperor, had given birth to a son. She had the responsibility of the running of the inner palaces after the death of the empress. Her father and brothers were rewarded for their part in the founding of the dynasty. Five years before the death of the emperor, Guo was implicated in a crime along with two other consorts. All three were executed.¹⁵ Palace women were at times subjected to abuses. Emperor Shizong (r.1521-1567) was a harsh man. Some palace women took desperate measures and tried to assassinate him while he was asleep. The emperor survived the attempt and all involved were executed.¹⁶

Towards the end of the Ming, several members of the imperial

family were converted to Christianity—the widow of the father of Zhaozong (1646-1662) was baptized as Helena; his biological mother was baptized as Maria; his wife, the empress, as Anna; his infant son, the heir-apparent, as Constantine; and another princess as Agatha. These baptisms gave rise to protests from certain officials but the imperial women stood firm.¹⁷

Palace Women of the Qing Dynasty

Non-Han state court politics were different from that of the Han Chinese as steppe states required adult rulers so regencies were uncommon and marriage was not a way to power. Instead, non-Han rulers tended to use marriage as a way to cement alliances with foreign rulers. The Khan's wives became permanent members of the ruling house together with his sisters and brothers. When there were regencies, the empress was seen as an individual to be entrusted with power and authority in the same manner as an imperial brother or sister.¹⁸ Since the princess did not lose her membership in her natal family, they were able to bring their husbands into the inner circle and they were able to participate in government so, in a way, the emperor did not give away his daughters. He used them to obtain sons-in-law as we have seen in the case of Genghis Khan.¹⁹

Unlike the Han Chinese rulers who regarded their brothers and sons as threats to the throne,²⁰ the Qing strategy was to use imperial kinsmen in governance but did not enfeoff them nor give them territories to hold. Instead, Qing rulers emphasized competence and named these individuals to service based on their loyalty, as perceived by the emperor. This is not to say that the emperor trusted imperial princes as all were required to reside in the capital and their stipends and estates were dependent on imperial favor. Their estates were managed by stewards responsible to the throne. These imperial personages were forbidden to have close friendships with Han officials and every aspect of their lives required the emperor's approval, including such things as permission to leave the capital, who their children could marry, and the inheritance of their heirs.²¹

Marriage Policy

For political purposes, the early Manchu emperors took wives descended from Genghis Khan so that their descendants would be seen as legitimate heirs of the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty as well. The first marriage alliance between the Borjigit²²clan and Nurhaci's family was

when Nurhaci married Borjigit Prince Mingan's daughter in 1612. Two years later, at the age of fifteen, the future Empress Xiao Duanwen (1599-1649), was married to Nurhaci's eighth son, Hong Taiji (1626-1643) who also took her niece as one of his empresses and another three of his concubines were from the Borjigit clan. During the Qing, 16 empresses and concubines of the Manchu royal family were Mongols and there were at least eighty-six marriages between the Manchu and Mongol noble families.²³

Manchu marriages with Mongol nobles increased as the Qing armies expanded into central Asia in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries so that twenty-five percent of empresses, sixteen percent of princes' wives, and fifty-five percent of princesses' spouses were Mongol. Empresses and principal wives of princes and husbands of princesses came from a small number of favored houses. The imperial family members only married with banner families. Of the six hundred and forty-one Manchu clans, only thirty-one were favored with marriage with the imperial family. The number of empresses and concubines important enough to have biographies ranged from the more than forty of Emperor Kangxi (1661-1722), who lived a long life, to the three of Emperor Guangxu (1875-1908), who lived a much shorter life. All Manchu, not only members of the imperial family, were forbidden to marry Han Chinese who were not in the Banners. Those who disobeyed this rule would be punished and their offspring expelled from the lineage. Han Chinese, not in the banners, could be taken in as concubines. Although many of the great Manchu aristocratic houses married princesses, the rulers favored Mongol grooms. The Qianlong emperor declared that this preference should be maintained although he also permitted princesses to marry into distinguished banner families.²⁴

After 1653, young girls in the banners between thirteen and fourteen *sui* had to be presented to the palace in Beijing before they could be betrothed. Some were immediately chosen to be wives or consorts for the princes or the emperor. Others were named Ladies-in-waiting, serving a five-year term; those who caught the emperor's eye

would be promoted into the harem. Women selected through a separate draft for palace maids were daughters of bondservants in the upper three banners. These women, too, might be promoted into the harem and sixteen percent of imperial consorts were originally palace maids.²⁵ Recruitment of women into the palace was done every three years through drafting of daughters of officials in the banners. Those who caught the emperor's eye would be selected for the harem. Some of those recruited were chosen to be wives for the princes, others served in the palace for a five-year term. Palace maids selected through a separate draft could be promoted into the harem and sixteen percent became imperial consorts.²⁶

Imperial Women²⁷

The influence of imperial women was feared by the Manchu and in the early struggle for power, the empress of Nurhaci, Abahai (1590-126)—also known as Dafei—was forced to commit suicide and was buried with her husband. Hong Taiji's mother had died and so he might have been more acceptable as there would be no strong maternal influence during his rule. The mother of the Yongzhen emperor (1722-1735) was separated from her son soon after his birth. He was raised by another imperial woman (d.1689) who was of noble ancestry and whose only daughter had died. Yongzhen was very close to his foster mother.²⁸

To prevent palace women and their families from gaining power, palace regulations made it almost impossible for an imperial consort to remain close to her natal kin. Visits home were rare and should they occur, her parents and grandparents had to kneel before her. Imperial permission was needed for meetings with parents even when a woman was pregnant or when her parents were elderly. Special permission was needed for them to send servants to their family homes as messengers. The women were forbidden to give or receive gifts from family members. Motherhood brought consorts honor and sometimes political power especially if she had a son who became emperor. Of the eleven emperors who ruled from 1644 to

1911 only one, the Daoguang emperor (r. 1820-1850) was the son of an empress. The birth mothers of the Yongzheng, Qianlong (r.1735-1796) and Jiaqing (1796-1820) emperors came from lowly bondservant backgrounds. Motherhood usually brought promotion but the title of empress dowager was usually conferred on her by her son should he become emperor.²⁹

The women who survived the power struggles became very influential; for example, after the death of Hong Taiji (1643), the mother of the infant Fulin (who became the Shunzhi emperor), became very important. She allied herself with prominent Manchu nobles who were not imperial kinsmen but had been active in the conquest. She brought up her grandson, the future Kangxi emperor, and helped him get rid of the regent, Oboi (c.1610-1669), and rule in his own right. Her power and political role during her son's infancy and the regency of her grandson could be compared with that of Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), who dominated the last 50 years of the dynasty.

Powerful Regents

Empress Dowager Xiaozhuangwen, grandmother of Kangxi, was married to Hong Taiji at the age of thirteen; her paternal aunt was also his consort. The Empress lived through three reigns of the early Qing and was able to assist two young emperors, Shunzhi and Kangxi in leading China to prosperity and strength. She had helped her husband consolidate Manchu rule and her son was chosen to succeed as emperor at the age of five. Paternal relatives played an important role in non-Han traditions and so her brother-in-law, Dorgon (1612-1650), was the most powerful regent. After the death of Dorgon, she assisted her son in using Han Chinese to counterbalance and suppress the anti-Qing forces. At times, it was necessary for her to reward the army with funds from her own palace and she was sympathetic toward victims of natural disasters, donating to disaster relief. After the death of her son, she helped her grandson get rid of a powerful regent and assume his right to rule. She and her grandson

were together for over thirty years and Kangxi had great love for her. He would be with her day and night when she was ill, praying for her recovery. She died at the age of seventy-five.³⁰

Empress Dowager Cixi³¹ is known in the West³² as one of the three most powerful women in Chinese history who exercised supreme power as *de facto* ruler. The others were Empress Lü of the Han and Empress Wu of the Tang. Cixi, a concubine of Emperor Xianfeng (r.1850-1861) had given birth to Xianfeng's only son. After his death, she and his empress, Cian³³ (1837-1881), the daughter of a duke, became co-regents of the young six-year old emperor, Tongzhi (1856-1875). These two regents ruled, behind a lowered silk screen, together with a half-brother of the deceased emperor until Tongzhi reached majority. Unfortunately, the young man died two years later. By that time, Cixi had become so powerful that she was able to place her nephew, the ten-year old son, Guangxu (r.1875-1908), on the throne despite the fact that the nephew and her son were of the same generation. While this practice was frowned upon by the Han Chinese, it was acceptable to the non-Hans as fraternal succession.³⁴ Cian died two years later and Cixi continued her regency until 1889 when she announced that Guangxu had reached his majority and could assume his personal rule. She also announced that he would need a virtuous wife to assist him and that her niece, later known as Empress Longyu, would be named Empress.³⁵ Even though Guangxu was assumed to be ruling on his own, Cixi continued to exercise informal power to the extent of executing his advisors and putting the emperor under house arrest for the remainder of his life after he issued his edict for Hundred Days of Reform (1898). After the death of Guangxu,³⁶ Cixi named her three-year old grandnephew, Puyi³⁷ (r.1909-1912), as Guangxu's successor. She died the day following Guangxu's death at the age of seventy-four. In 1912, Cixi's niece, Empress Dowager Longyu, signed the imperial edict announcing the abdication of the boy emperor, Puyi, with the agreement that the two of them could continue living in the palaces. She died a year later.³⁸

Manchu women had greater freedom and authority than Han Chinese women and were forbidden to bind their feet. They walked in public places, rode horses, practiced archery and participated in hunts. Princess Hexiao (1775-1823) dressed in man's clothing and accompanied her father on hunts. Emperor Qianlong (r.1735-1796) was recorded as saying that if she had been a boy he would make her his heir. During the Qing, women were occasionally active on the battlefield: a few were even named banner lieutenant during the conquest. They held key roles in religious services at court and both Manchu and Mongol nobles of both sexes had the right to divorce.³⁹

Manchu Impact on Chinese Women

The Manchu tried, but was not able, to stop foot-binding in the early Qing. They were able to reduce the number and change the pattern of widow suicide practiced in the Ming. They also abolished prostitution. During the Han dynasty, the wives and daughters of some criminals were sentenced to serve in state-managed military brothels. Their sex worker status would be passed on to their descendants. Beginning with the Sui dynasty, state managed sex workers were referred to as *yueren* (singers, dancers, maids, etc.) and worked within *yuehu*—music households. The practice of sentencing wives and daughters to prostitution continued through the Ming. In some periods of history, prisoners of war and their families were similarly sentenced. Under Ming law, private prostitution was considered illegal. Prostitutes not in the state managed service were widows, discarded concubines, and divorced women who had to survive by becoming prostitutes under the pretense of being Daoist and Buddhist nuns; there were also wives or daughters of poor men who had to prostitute themselves to help earn money for the family.⁴⁰

Yuan law prohibited commoner males from forcing a wife, concubine, adopted daughter or a domestic slave to prostitute. The man was also prohibited from forcing a wife, concubine or adopted daughter to sing and dance to entertain others. In the Ming, the emperor periodically announced amnesties to release descendants of

political prisoners from their status as sex workers in the state managed system. Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing abolished the *yuehu* households and made them commoners in 1723; all former sex workers were held to the same standard of chastity as the commoners. Prostitutes, their pimps (often their husbands), and those who used their services all became criminals. All sex work became criminal acts resulting in the complete prohibition of prostitution. But the oldest profession is not easily abolished and private prostitution continued to operate as an unlawful practice up to the present day.⁴¹

Epilog

Epilog¹

Archaeological findings and historical records show that women had more power and prestige in ancient times. During the Shang Dynasty, royal women served as envoys for the kings and led armies as in the case of Fu Hao.² Bronze inscriptions show that women still had political roles in the Zhou Dynasty and queens carried on social activities of importance. The wife of King Cheng (c. 1042-1021 B.C.E.) sent officials on missions and rewarded officials with slaves, cowries³ and cloth. Women of position appear to have enjoyed a great deal of freedom in Western Zhou and queens had their own officers who were themselves persons of high status.⁴

A line from the poem in the *Book of Poetry* shows that queens played a role in decision making and probably in the conduct of government. 'The beautiful wife splendidly side by side (with the king) has her place.' Parts of the poem strongly condemn women showing evidence of prejudice against women's influence in government. This prejudice led to placing the blame for the end of the Western Zhou dynasty on the beloved concubine of King Yu (781-771 B.C.E.) whom he made queen after he had set aside his original queen.⁵

'A wise man builds a city wall,
A wise woman overthrows it.
Beautiful is the wise women,
But she is an owl, a hooting owl.
A woman with a long tongue,
Is a promoter of evil.
Disorder is not sent down from Heaven,
It is produced by women.'⁶

The prejudice against women's influence in government⁷ may have been a factor leading to the reduction of power of palace women. By the Late Zhou, royal women appeared to have lost their external roles and were confined to the palaces. Women's status continued to erode through time. Under the Tang Dynasty law, even daughters who had married could inherit if all the male heirs had died. If there were

no sons, a daughter could inherit and a husband would be recruited into the family to continue the family name and lineage.⁸ In the Song Dynasty, a daughter could still claim inheritance especially in the form of a dowry which would remain under her control and taken into remarriage should she divorce or be widowed.⁹ After the Yuan Dynasty, a woman no longer had control of her dowry. She became completely economically dependent on the husband's family although a senior widow remained powerful and had control of her late husband's assets until she divided it among her sons.¹⁰

There are different theories regarding the decline of the status of women within the 2,000 years of history. Some point to prejudice against women's influence in government; others attribute it to the Confucian social order, the patriarchal system, and the ancestral cult. The example given for the latter was that in such a system, the family is dominated by the male and the order is hierarchically fixed and rigid. In so doing, the superior partners, the fathers, husbands, and rulers have more rights and the inferior partners, the children, the wives have less. The ancestral cult also required the production of a male heir and the obligation to, or failure of, doing so fell on the shoulders of women. The more Confucian the society was, the less freedom the woman enjoyed. The spread of the custom of foot-binding further restricted the activities of women. Women enjoyed more freedom during periods when the country was less united or under alien rule.¹¹

Chinese historians in the eleventh century further promoted moral views that differed from those of their predecessors, especially in respect to women.¹² It is thought that the heightened scrutiny of women by historians of the eleventh century is based on their concern of gross misconduct of powerful women during the Tang Dynasty. The backlash against women was already evident during the reign of Xuanzong of the Tang when the Preface of a privately published *History of the Northern Dynasties* instructed women in virtue and dissuaded them from illicit conduct.¹³ Examples can be seen in how Ouyang Xiu (1007-72) treated 'Notable Women' in his *Historical*

Records of the Five Dynasties and in the *New History of the Tang*.¹⁴ In the *Historical Records*, Ouyang Xiu places most of the blame for the political and moral decay of the Five Dynasties on women: on 'their seduction of powerful men, their rivalries, and their pitting of brother against brother, and father against son.'¹⁵

Ouyang Xiu and his colleagues added four biographies of Notable Women into the *New History of the Tang* that were not included in the *Old History of the Tang*. These four exemplary women had either maimed or killed themselves in frightful ways and their conduct was characterized as 'extreme acts of moral probity.'¹⁶ The first woman, Lu, gouged out her own eye to prove to her critically ill husband that she would protect her chastity and not marry another man should he die. The second woman, Zhou, sold her own flesh for meat so that her husband could have the money to travel home.¹⁷ The third woman, Dou, shielded her husband with her own body so that the bandit's knife was plunged into her, grievously injuring her, enabling her husband to escape unharmed. The fourth woman, Li, was torn between taking care of her infant or returning home to mourn her father and decided to cut off her breast and leave it with her child while she returned to mourn her father.¹⁸

The most drastic changes affecting women were initiated during the Mongol Yuan Dynasty when the Mongols changed the dowry system so that the Han Chinese woman's dowry was given to her husband's family and she no longer had control of it. When the Ming Dynasty was established, the dowry system, established by the Yuan, was retained and so under these circumstances, the Chinese widow was completely dependent on her in-laws as she was no longer economically able to support herself. If she was miserable within the marriage, she could not divorce her husband and return to her family as, without her dowry, they could not support her and her dependents. The remarriage of widows, to anyone outside of her deceased husband's family, was also difficult as she had no dowry. The Yuan legacy of widow chastity, living with the in-laws, was to impact Chinese women throughout the Ming and the Qing.¹⁹ Desperate

widows committed suicide until the situation became so drastic that the Qing Government condemned widow suicide.

In my previous work on *Palace Women in the Northern Sung*, I wrote that Chinese tradition confers upon the woman the same status held by her husband and so women's status must be discussed in terms of social and economic classes. That is to say, not all Chinese women were subordinate to all Chinese men but specific women were subordinate to specific men within their social and economic class.²⁰ This is especially true in the case of royal women. The female regent, who ruled, was above all men. The empress was above all the male officials, the royal consorts were above their own parents,²¹ and princesses were above their husbands and in-laws.²²

Royal women have been the focus of this study as historians are limited in their research by the availability of records. Some information on imperial women is available in their biographies as well as other sources. Outstanding women such as Ban Zhao of the Han Dynasty, and the celebrated poet, Li Qingzhao²³ (c. 1084-1155) of the Song Dynasty are known. The lives of elite women are at times noted in epitaphs and collected works by well-known personages. Women also left their lives and emotions in poetry or lyrics. These women not only wrote poetry, they also enjoyed reading and commenting on history and literature. In a study of letters written by women during the Ming and Qing dynasties, one finds that although household management and duties dominated most women's lives, women were able to share their concerns of study and intellectual interests with other women through letters.²⁴

I have analyzed forty-nine biographies of Song commoner women submitted to the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women*.²⁵ Thirty-four of these women were poets. Nine of them were courtesans who wrote lyrics about their sorrow at the departure of their lovers or on the tragic lives of courtesans. The women, from elite backgrounds, were wives and widows, and were praised for their intelligence, for their role in helping their husbands succeed and for educating their

children. The wives wrote about missing their husbands who had official duties and had not returned. One wife travelled a considerable distance in search of him. A widow wrote about chastity; another about having become a Daoist nun. A third widow wrote the poem before following her husband in death. The poems by the young girls were about love. Only one uneducated woman was found and she was praised for making excellent fish soup.

These biographies show that women from well-to-do families were educated so that they could, in time, educate their own children. Ouyang Xiu wrote that he had visited Xie Jingshan (c. 1037) who had finished first in the *jinshi* examination.²⁶ Ouyang wrote that Xie's mother and sister were both versed in the classics, that the sister was especially talented, and that it was too bad that she was born a woman as her contributions would never be properly recognized by society.²⁷ Another talented woman, Hu Shuxiu also known as Hu Wenrou (c. 1040), was extolled by her husband as being skillful and wise in world affairs and current events. He wrote that she knew the Five Classics.²⁸ She wrote poetry, lyrics, and was versed in Buddhist chants. She was also accomplished in mathematics so that the famous astronomer and scientist, Shen Guo (1031–1095), consulted her when he had questions.²⁹

Two women, who were not poets, were praised for being model wives and mothers. One was Cheng-shi (1010-1057), the wife of Su Xun (1009-1006) and the mother of Su Shi (1037-1101) and Su Zhe (1039-1112). She was from a wealthy family; was intelligent and hard working. She took over her husband's family responsibilities so that her husband could devote himself to study. She converted her dowry to cash and opened a clothing shop to pay for family expenses. When her husband left home to further his studies she also took over the education of their children. Cheng is credited with enabling her husband and two sons to be educated so that all three of them became great scholars and are included in the 'Eight Masters of Tang and Song.'³⁰

The other woman who was so praised was Li Wa (c. 1110), wife of Yue Fei (1103-1142). She was supportive of her husband when he was Commander-in-Chief. She provided logistic support and visited the homes of families of those on active duty with gifts of money and clothing. She visited the sick officers and prepared medicines for the sick. She ensured that officers killed in action were mourned in accordance with social customs and arranged marriages of the orphaned daughters with Yue Fei's own family. She was awarded honorary titles for her work but these titles were taken away when her husband was disgraced, imprisoned and eventually executed. When her husband's loyalty was later recognized, her honors were restored and she was able to return from exile.³¹

Changing Status of Women

As society changed, so did the status of women. Bearing this in mind, this chapter shall look at the changing role of women in different areas such as religion, Confucianism, law, the military, imperial politics, and post-imperial politics to see how women's status changed in these areas.

Religion

The importance of women in Chinese religion is suggested by the evidence of an archaic female goddess cult. In addition, shamans in ancient times were women and a shaman had a high status as she was the mediator between the spiritual world and the human one. As kings and later ordinary men took over the role of shaman, women's role and status in religion was reduced. When the practice of divination lost favor and intellectuals tried to find answers to ethical questions in other areas, the status of shamans was reduced further while respect for rational philosophers or teachers such as Confucius, Mencius, Laozi and Zhuangzi gained the respect of the elite. Human destiny was increasingly associated with the activities of humans rather than with the authority of spirits and ghosts. The woman's role might have changed both with the decrease of their importance in their functions in the religious area and with the development of rational philosophy in the Zhou dynasty.³²

In time, women no longer officiated at sacrifices except in their roles as nuns in either the native Daoist religion or the imported Buddhist one. For the lay woman, her religious duties were those of performing charitable deeds, transmitting religious teachings to their children, and chanting prayers and meditating for the salvation of their families and for themselves. Daoist nuns had a more equal status to the monks and could ordain other nuns whereas Buddhist nuns had to be ordained by monks. The inferior roles of Buddhist nuns can be seen in the mandate that

A nun of even a hundred years' standing shall salute, rise to meet,

*entreat humbly, and perform all respectful offices for a monk, even if he be but that day ordained. This regulation shall be honored, esteemed, revered, and worshipped, and is not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.*³³

Confucianism

Confucianism dominated Chinese thinking for about 2,000 years and throughout time, it evolved and changed as the values of society changed, each influencing the other. As these changes occurred the status of women also changed. Social order and human relationships are hierarchical and fixed in Confucianism and women lived in a patriarchal system and so were given a subordinate role. Women's role was more subordinate if the society was more strictly Confucian, more structured and hierarchical. Many women actively embraced these values and transmitted them to the next generation.³⁴

Under Confucianism, women were to follow the father in youth, the husband in adulthood, and the son when widowed—the so-called three dependencies/follows (*sancong*), a tradition developed from the dress code for women in mourning when a woman dressed in the clothes of the rank held by her father before marriage, the rank of her husband after marriage and the rank of her son when widowed. She was to:

- To follow/obey her father as a child;
- To follow/obey her husband as a wife;
- To follow/obey the son as a widow.

The submissiveness of women is said to have been reinforced by teachings on the four virtues (*side*)—moral virtue, speech, appearance and needlework—as defined by Ban Zhao (c.45-116), the only female official historian. She wrote that ‘a woman must choose what words to say and must not use coarse language; she must concentrate on sewing and weaving and must not joke around.’ ‘Women should not group together by themselves; and should not watch outside by the door.’³⁵

While many historians emphasize the fact that in the *Precepts for Women (Nüjie)*, Ban Zhao advocates the submissiveness of women to men, we must not forget that Ban Zhao herself was not one who stayed submissively at home sewing and weaving. Instead, she was the only official female historian in traditional China, a teacher of palace women in the Han imperial palace, and advisor to the Empress Dowager Deng Sui (81-121) who ruled for fifteen years (106-121) as regent for two emperors. In the *Virtue of Yin*, it is pointed out that Ban Zhao stressed the education of young girls between the ages of eight and fifteen. Thus Ban's advice to women to be submissive was practical as these qualities were necessary for a girl to survive at that time. Ban Zhao had also written that, 'Though a boy is born like a wolf, it is feared that he may grow up like a worm, and yet though a girl is born like a mouse, it is still feared that she may grow up to be like a tiger.'³⁶

Confucianism became more conservative when Zhu Xi (1130-1200) developed Neo-Confucianism (*lixue*), emphasizing social harmony, proper personal conduct, and the three bonds: the authority of the ruler over the minister, the father over the son, and the husband over the wife. Zhu also emphasized rituals and the correct way of doing things such as family rituals. He gave detailed advice on how to conduct weddings, funerals, family ceremonies, and the veneration of ancestors. His teachings emphasized that a good Confucian woman should be submissive to her husband. The correct performance of the rituals also consumed a great deal of a woman's time.³⁷ Confucianism became even more conservative in the Ming and so we have the saying, 'Being without talent is a virtue in a woman.'³⁸

Law

Legal information on bamboo strips, found in a coffin in December 1975, showed that men and women were treated differently under the law as early as the Qin dynasty.³⁹ There were different degrees of punishment for those convicted of crime. When men were sentenced to build walls women were to pound grain. When men were

sentenced to gather firewood, women were to sift rice.⁴⁰ Rations to male and female convicts were also different as men were given more than women, except that women who embroidered would be given similar amounts of rations as men.⁴¹

Laws were administered by Confucians and their perspective of the family and the class system became embedded in traditional law and so the family and the class system were fundamental features in Chinese traditional law. This is why the extant Tang Code shows that the law recognized the parents' authority over their children who had no independent right to own private property⁴² or to live separate from their parents; they could not choose their own spouses. The law also recognized the supremacy of seniors and husbands over junior relatives and wives. Disputes between family members were always judged according to an individual's status in the group. The law also recognized the different statuses of individuals, so people of different status were not treated alike before the law. Nobles and officials enjoyed certain legal privileges while the common people were legally unprivileged.⁴³

The traditional purpose of marriage was to benefit the family from the ancestors down; the personal relationship between husband and wife was of secondary importance. If the marriage was unable to achieve its objective to benefit the family, then it could be dissolved. Marriage was arranged by the parents and their consent was necessary for divorce. The wishes of the husband were important so he was usually not compelled to divorce his wife. The woman always had the right to divorce and the right to remarriage. Divorce law developed as a result of the demand of justice. The first stage allowed divorcing a wife without cause. The second stage, developed during the Spring and Autumn Period, required legal grounds for divorcing a wife while a concubine could be ousted without cause. Under the law, there were three kinds of divorce: the Seven Conditions, Breaking the Bond and Mutual Consent.⁴⁴

The 'Seven Conditions' was established during the Spring and

Autumn Period. It was infrequently used during the Han Dynasty but became more established during the Tang. Its use then decreased in time. The Seven Conditions were: disobedience to in-laws, barrenness, adultery, jealousy, incurable diseases, loquacity, and theft.⁴⁵ There was also protection built in for the wife as she could not be divorced if she had mourned for the in-laws; had gone from rags to riches with the husband; and if she had no family to return to.⁴⁶

The Second kind of divorce, 'Breaking the Bond,' involved criminal elements and was in force before the Han. Either spouse could compel the other to divorce through legal proceedings. Divorce could also be compelled by an officer of the court and failure to do so was punishable. When a divorce was ordered and the couple failed to divorce, they would be punished. Under the Tang and Song, the penalty was one-year imprisonment for the one who refused to divorce. If both refused, then both were punished. Under the Ming and Qing, the punishment was eighty lashes.⁴⁷

From the Tang Dynasty on, the law of every dynasty required legal grounds for divorce and there were penalties for divorcing the wife without grounds; should a man wish to divorce his wife, she could refuse to accept it and she had the right to bring the matter before the authorities. The wife could also sue for divorce based on the disappearance or desertion of the husband, specific crimes committed by the husband, and serious maltreatment by the husband. Despite these legal protections for women they were not often enforced as, in China, there was a gap between the written law and custom and few people went to the courts concerning personal affairs.⁴⁸

The third kind of divorce, 'Mutual Consent,' was used from the Jin (Gold) dynasty through the Qing (1644 -1912). Grounds were not required under Mutual Consent. Most actions were initiated by the husband but the wife's parents had to be consulted and compensation by either side would be negotiated.⁴⁹

During the Tang and Song the penalty for illegal divorce was

one and one-half years in prison. If one of the seven grounds for divorce was used but one of the three limitations was violated, the penalty was 100 lashes, the divorce invalidated and the wife returned to the husband. During the Ming and Qing, the penalty for illegal divorce was reduced to eighty lashes, the divorce was made void and the wife returned to the husband.⁵⁰

The custody of the children was always an important issue and was usually given to the husband unless a special agreement was made for the wife to have custody. As for the dowry, from the Han through the Tang, the dowry was returned to the wife's family but from the Yuan through the Qing, the husband kept the dowry. In practice, the dowry was often returned and the Qing law was later changed to reflect actual practice.⁵¹

Military

Many of the non-Han royal women were regents as well as warriors such as the empresses of the Xi Xia Dynasty and the two great warrior empresses of the Liao Dynasty who had their own ordo. Princesses could also be warriors such as Princess Pingyang (598-623), who helped her father conquer and establish the Tang Dynasty.⁵²

There were strong Han Chinese commoner women who led rebellions and participated in the military. A favorite story for young girls has always been that of Hua Mulan. One may argue as to whether the story of Hua Mulan is legend or reality, but there can be no argument concerning the military roles of the two famous Han Chinese generals, Liang Hongyu (c.1100-1135), who lived during the period between the Northern and Southern Song, and Qin Liangyü (1547-1648), who lived during the late Ming Dynasty. Both women were from military families and both became generals trying to protect the dynasty against the invading forces, Liang against the Jurchen and Qin against the Manchu.⁵³

In May, 2015, Chinese authorities released the information on the discovery of a gold filled Ming dynasty tomb in Nanjing in 2008.

The skeleton was that of Lady Mei. Two stone epitaphs tell her story. She started life as a lower class unwashed and unkempt woman who, at the age of fifteen, became concubine to a duke who was about thirty years older than she was. She gave birth to the duke's son but her husband passed away soon after the child's birth. Lady Mei raised the child and when he came of age, she took him to see the emperor who charged him with controlling Yunnan, the province his father had ruled. Lady Mei was awarded the title of dowager duchess. She ruled next to her son and became his political and military strategist advising him to bring peace to the 'barbarian' tribes. When Lady Mei died, it was said that the whole province mourned at her grave.⁵⁴

Many poor women participated in rebellions, serving as fighters, cooks, as well as serving as rebel leaders. Li Xiaolin writes about the first known woman leader of a peasant uprising, Lü Mu of the Western Han (206-9 B.C.E) who lived in Shandong. Her family was wealthy but her son, an official responsible for public security, was wrongfully executed for a minor offense. Lü Mu had no military training but was determined to avenge his death. She spent four years selling all her family's property and raising a force of several hundred capable young people and designated herself as the general. In 17 C.E., she attacked, captured the governor and killed him. She offered the general's head to her son's spirit. She treated her army well and they did not loot; the army grew to ten thousand persons as more peasants joined her. A year later, her army joined the peasant uprising, the Red Eyebrows.⁵⁵

A famous rebel leader, Chen Shuozhen (d.653), lived in the early Tang Dynasty; in 653, she led a rebel army of 40,000 to 50,000 persons and occupied many areas in western Zhejiang and southern Anhui provinces. She claimed that she had ascended into Heaven and had become immortal and had returned to correct wrongs in society. She called herself Wenjia Emperor and organized her own court, but she was defeated and killed.⁵⁶ During the Qing Dynasty (1636 or 1644-1911), there was a famous female pirate, Zheng Yi Sau (1775-1844), a prostitute who married a pirate leader. She assisted

her husband in unifying and consolidating his forces so that by 1894 they had 400 junks and 70,000 pirates under their command. After her husband's death she took over her husband's command and became so strong that the provincial officers had to turn to the west for assistance. In order to defeat her, the officials negotiated with the British for use of their vessel outfitted with twenty cannons and fifty American volunteer. The Portuguese also leased to the Qing officials six men-of-war. Reinforced, the Guangdong navy fought for six months and she finally surrendered in 1810.⁵⁷

About two to three thousand women took part in the Taiping Tianguo Rebellion but their numbers grew to 500,000 by the time they reached Nanjing. During the Boxer Rebellion, women were divided into groups by age and the most active group were young women between twelve to eighteen *sui*; some were as young as eight or nine. They trained with swords and every few days these women groups would go through the streets joining in the burning of foreign buildings and the killing of foreigners. Female leaders fighting in both the Taiping Tianguo and the Boxer Movements showed strong leadership in organizing and commanding armies.⁵⁸

During the Twentieth Century, women took part in the 1911 revolution for a short time and on a limited scale; after 1926, there was a first generation of female cadets in the Huangpu Military Academy. During the Anti-Japanese war, women participated as guerrilla fighters, arsonists, assassins, bomb makers, leaders in uprisings, and defenders. Some women were put into gender segregated units and were assigned to combat support such as nursing, cooking and uniform manufacture. Male commanders tried to keep women out of regular combat units but when the troops were losing, the women would be assigned to cover the main army's escape. In the early years of the communist movement (1927-35) many women served in combat and non-combat roles with at least 20,000 taking part in twelve different bases.⁵⁹ It is estimated that 2,600 women participated on the Long March; some were teenagers escaping their abusive in-law families into which they had been sold, others were

avoiding arranged marriages, some were running away from starvation and others were revolutionaries escaping capture. There were also wives, sisters, daughters, or nieces of the Communists; another 8,000 who worked in jobs such as nurses, carriers, laundry workers.⁶⁰

In 1994, 240,000 women served in the People's Liberation Army (PLA); eight percent of the military personnel. Women served in traditional female roles such as medical workers, administrative personnel, communications specialists, logistic support staff, political and propaganda workers, scientific researchers and technicians. Enlisted women served as switchboard operators, typists, map makers or data entry personnel. Most career soldiers worked as nurses. In 1990, 70.6 percent of career soldiers were nurses. By the end of 1992, there were two hundred and ninety female pilots; none had been assigned to combat duty although some were test pilots.⁶¹

Imperial Politics

Women in the imperial palace had the opportunity to gain power for themselves and their families. Yet life in the palace was fraught with danger as the women battled each other for power. Being an empress was not enough as she could be deposed, exiled, or ordered to commit suicide. The most important factor was the favor of the emperor who was surrounded by beautiful women. It was, therefore, most important to ensure that the emperor did not stray. This is why an emperor could find the hands of a palace woman served to him at his next meal as he had admired them earlier. A ruthless empress would kill off the babies of other palace women resulting in succession problems as there would not be an heir to the throne.

A woman who was favored by the emperor, yet had no sons, might be powerful enough to conspire with another to pretend to have given birth to the other's son in order to win the right to the position of empress. Once a woman had given birth to a son, she still needed to

fight to have her son made the heir to the throne. Yet, it was also dangerous for the woman to be the mother of the heir as she could be forced to commit suicide in order to prevent her from having influence on him should he succeed to the throne.

The empress who had her husband's favor needed the opportunity to learn to participate in governmental affairs. The opportunity would arise if the emperor was often ill and needed her assistance. She could then either assist him or rule in his name. Should he pass away and if the succeeding emperor was too young to rule she could rule as regent. If the young emperor did not survive, another younger one could be named to succeed him, thus lengthening the rule of the regent. At times, the regent refused to step down even when the young emperor came of age. This appears to have been accepted by the officials if they considered her a satisfactory ruler.

Women who worked in the palace could climb the career ladder; some advanced within their functional work and responsibility area and others through promotion from the palace women's organization to the imperial women's organization and become a consort of the emperor. If they had the emperor's favor they could even be promoted to the position of empress.⁶² Even women who were not consorts of the emperor could rise high. An example is Lu Lingxuan ⁶³(d.578), the nursemaid of Gao Wei (Houzhù: 556-78), the fifth and last ruler of Northern Qi (550-77). Lu had entered the palace as a slave as her husband had fought against the Northern Qi. She was assigned to be the nursemaid to the heir. In time, the young man became increasingly dependent on her and she was able to influence his appointments and demotions of officials, acquiring high appointments for her sons, as well as the appointment of her adopted daughter as a co-empress.⁶⁴

Princesses could not inherit the throne and the only instance of a princess being proposed as heir to the throne was Princess Anle of the Tang Dynasty. Princesses could be influential if they were the favorite sisters or daughters of the emperor, or the biological

daughters of the Regent. They could also gain power from forming alliances with the favorite imperial concubine. The most powerful princess in Chinese history was Princess Taiping, daughter of Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu.

The Han Dynasty signed a treaty called '*heqin*,'⁶⁵ giving a princess in marriage to the Xiongnu chief, Modu Chanyu (234-174 B.C.E.).⁶⁶ This set the pattern for relations between the Chinese court and the tribal chiefs of Inner Asia and continued throughout imperial history. During the Han dynasty, at least thirteen princesses were given in marriage to the Xiongnu but none of them were the sisters or daughters of the emperor. They were palace women or daughters of nobles who had offended the throne. After they were chosen, they would be adopted by the emperor,⁶⁷ and then given in marriage to the Xiongnu chief. A number of these princesses married the sons and/or grandsons of their first husband as in the case of Liu Jieyou (121-49 B.C.E.). She was very influential as the wife of three Wusun kings, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother to three other Wusun kings and mother-in-law to another.⁶⁸ While the dynasties ruled by Chinese Han emperors married out women to the non-Han tribes, they did not take in non-Han women into the harem until the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when they accepted Korean women as tribute, a legacy of the Mongol rulers of the Yuan Dynasty.⁶⁹

During the Song dynasty, the marriage of a princess was very costly, requiring up to 70,000 strings of cash.⁷⁰ Support of princesses was also expensive as the monthly stipend was 150 strings of cash.⁷¹ For special reasons, a princess could be given a monthly stipend of 200 strings of cash. In the mid-990's this was increased to 300 strings of cash which meant that they were getting the same stipend as the Grand Council and Military Commissioner. In 1033, the Great Elder (*dazhang*) princess⁷² would receive 1,000 strings of cash. There were times when a princess would be given more money; for example, in 1102, Renzong's daughter, the Great Elder princess of Qin and Wei received another 200 strings of cash in addition to her monthly stipend.

Women and Post-Imperial Politics

The Women's Movement in China began as part of the reform movement by both men and women striving for modernization and westernization. Equality for women was one of the central issues of the reformers. They felt that China was weak due to the physical weakness of children born of women with bound feet as well as the enforced illiteracy of women who were ignorant of the affairs of the world. The reformers felt that the westerners were strong as they educated both boys and girls.⁷³ Kang Youwei (1858-1927), the leader of the reform movement, memorialized the emperor pointing out that foot-binding inconvenienced the poor in their work and caused the rich to have weak off-spring. He said that foot-binding must be prohibited and a system of penalties be implemented against those who continued to practice foot-binding. The Qing Government then outlawed foot-binding in 1902. Women's education was achieved through schools established by the missionaries and intellectuals. Women in these schools were also taught military skills in physical education classes. Many of these women joined the political parties and participated in the rebellion against the Manchu Qing Government.⁷⁴

The three most famous and influential women of that time period were the three women known as the Soong Sisters. All three were educated at American universities. The eldest, Soong Ailing⁷⁵ (1888-1973), worked as the secretary to Sun Yatsen (1866-1925) after graduation until she married H.H. Kung (1881-1967), the richest man in China. Kung was highly influential in determining the economic policies of the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) government in the 1930s and 1940s. He also served as Finance Minister of the Republic of China (ROC). Soong Ailing and her husband were very supportive of first, Sun Yat-sen, then of Chiang Kai-shek. The second sister, Soong Qingling⁷⁶ (1893-1981), worked as Sun's secretary after the marriage of Ailing. She fell in love with Sun and married him. Her family opposed the marriage as he was twenty-six years her senior. After Sun's death, Qingling tried to have the KMT and the Chinese

Communist Party (CPP) work together to fight the Japanese. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, she held several prominent positions in the new government, including as the Vice-President of China. The youngest sister, Soong Meiling⁷⁷ (1898-2003), married Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) who became President of the Republic of China in 1948. Meiling rallied the people against the Japanese invasion and in 1942 conducted a speaking tour of the United States to gain support for her husband. She went with her husband to Taiwan when he moved his government there claiming that his government represented all of China. Both Ailing and Meiling died in the United States whereas Qingling remained in the PRC all her life.

At that time, many Chinese women fought for political rights and the 1946 Constitution stipulated that women had the right to vote and to stand for elections. The Constitution guaranteed a minimum of ten percent of seats (Reserved Seat System) for women in legislative bodies at all levels of Government.⁷⁸ On Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (KMT) continued to claim to be the legitimate government of all China. To demonstrate the continuity, all institutions and laws established during the Republican Period (1911-1949) were kept and implemented. The Reserved Seat System, within the Constitution of 1946, was pivotal to the rise of political power of women in Taiwan. The system ensured that women had a guarantee of a minimum of ten percent of seats in legislative bodies at all levels of Government. By the 1970s and 1980s, women occupied more than their minimum number of seats on the lower council elections.⁷⁹ By 1998, women occupied nineteen percent of the Legislative Yuan elections. Women were also elected to leadership positions. Hsu Shih-hsien (1908-1983), won election in Chiayi in 1968 to become Taiwan's first female mayor.⁸⁰ Many other women have served as mayors such as Hsu's two daughters. The first female mayor of an important city was Chen Chu (b. 1950) who served as mayor of Kaoshiung (2006-2010). Annette Lu (b. 1944) was elected and served as vice-president (2000-2008). The first woman to run for the presidency was Tsai Ing-wen (b. 1956) in 2011. Although she did not

win that race, she won the election by a landslide in 2016 and is the first female President.⁸¹

Hong Kong had been a British Colony until 1997 when it was returned to China. Women were appointed to the Legislative Council (LegCo) prior to 1995. The British Government, anticipating this handover to China, began to institute elections. The first direct elections of the Legislative Council were held in 1991. It became a fully elected body in 1995. According to the LegCo website, eleven of the 70 current members (2016) are female (15.7 percent).⁸² In the Executive Council (ExCo) four of the 14 appointed unofficial members are female (35.7 percent) but only one of the 15 official members (cabinet ministers), is female (7 percent).⁸³

Macau is another Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. It was ceded by the Qing to the Portuguese in 1887 and returned to the PRC in 1998. The 2012 report to the United Nations states that four of twenty-nine members of the Legislative Assembly are female (13.8 percent).⁸⁴

The regents in Chinese history had to marry the previous emperor and had to be either the biological or the titular mother of the young emperor. These regents had gained their experience assisting and participating in their husbands' work. The modern woman in the PRC needs to be appointed to positions of power. The leadership in the PRC (2013) consists of twenty-five politburo members with only two females (8 percent).⁸⁵ The seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee are all male. The seven members of the Secretariat are all male; the eleven members of the Central Military Commission are all male. Of the twenty-five cabinet members, announced in March, 2013, two are female (8 percent).⁸⁶

The Future Outlook

If we are concerned about the slow progress of women's political rights in PRC we need to look to the United Nations (UN) for assistance as it has assumed the leadership role in the area of equal

rights for women. China (the PRC government) joined the UN in 1971⁸⁷ and since then has signed a number of human rights treaties. The most important one affecting women is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and became effective in 1981. China was among the original sixty-four states to sign the treaty in 1980.⁸⁸ The UN introduced an Optional Protocol to CEDAW in 2000 giving women the right to petition the UN directly should they be victims of discrimination; that is, it allowed the UN Committee on CEDAW to receive and consider complaints from individuals or groups within the different countries. China has refused to ratify the Protocol.

Countries that have signed CEDAW have to submit national reports, at least every four years on what they have done to eliminate discrimination against women. Non-government organizations (NGOs) can file alternate/shadow reports on their perspectives of the situation. That is, the country report usually paints a rosy picture but the NGOs can file a shadow report if they do not agree with the country report. These reports frequently point out areas of concern.⁸⁹ China has adopted a practice of filing a combined report every eight years. The most recent report filed by PRC was in 2012 but the report has not been released by the UN although a Chinese version is available on the web.⁹⁰ The version that has been released by the UN, is the Combined Fifth and Six Reports filed in 2004.⁹¹

In the area of decision making, the 2004 report states that ‘the Government had adopted preferential policies for women in order to promote their participation in decision-making, including the selection of women to serve as senior officials at various local levels. At the provincial, municipal and country levels, there is to be at least one female member at the supervisory level in both the Communist Party and Government leadership. At least fifty percent of the supervisory level personnel of the Communist Party and the Government are to be female. In selecting officials, priority shall be given to women among similarly qualified candidates. In an open recruitment of senior

officials, a certain number of posts shall be earmarked for women.’ In its response to the report, the CEDAW Committee states, ‘The Committee remains concerned that Chinese domestic legislation still does not contain a definition of discrimination against women, in accordance with article 1 of the Convention,’⁹²

Conclusion

Women's power and status in society have changed through time and will continue to change. It is hoped that with women's increased political participation their roles in other areas would improve as well. Elections have not been institutionalized in the PRC but there has been an effort to appoint some women to a few high offices. Unfortunately, women have to retire five years earlier than men and so have a shorter time to climb the career ladder. The picture of political participation of women in PRC is not as rosy as that in Taiwan where the Reserved Seat System has enabled women to participate in politics and to develop political expertise and gain representation at the highest levels of government.⁹³ But, the PRC Government is constantly promising the U.N. that it will, and is improving, and, if China lives up to its promises, women's status should improve in time.

Notes

Endnotes and Maps

Notes for each chapter are separately numbered and collected in the corresponding section below. The number of a note in the text is a hyperlink to the endnote, and the number of the endnote is a hyperlink back to the text. In other words, clicking or tapping on the number of a note in the text will result in a jump to the corresponding endnote, and clicking or tapping the number at the beginning of the endnote will result in return to the original position in the text

A variation of this is used for notes that correspond to maps. The endnote text will provide the reference source for the map, and it starts with a [View Map] hyperlink that will display the map and its caption on its own page. The caption has a [Return to Text] hyperlink back to the original text.

Notes to the Introduction

1. Imperial China refers to the period from the time that Qin Shihuangdi united China and established the Qin Dynasty in 221 B.C.E. to the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911.
2. His heirs succeeded as emperors until the tenth emperor, Gaozong, had to search for a successor among the heirs from the founding emperor as all the heirs from the second emperor had been captured by the Jin (Gold) Dynasty.
3. In the Chinese terminology for indicating age, the term *sui* is used to indicate the year of a person's life; thus a child at birth is 1 *sui*.
4. Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women in the Northern Sung*, (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1981). Also available as an ebook on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)
5. Richard L. Davis, *Wind Against the Mountain*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 42. 1996), 35, 38, 108-113, 119.
6. Bao Shanben, 'Shangguan, Empress of Emperor Zhao,' in Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A.D. Stefanowska, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Antiquity through Sui, 1600 B.C.E.-618 C.E.* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 187-189.
7. When the maternal relatives became too powerful, the emperor had no choice but to turn to the eunuchs, who had been his personal attendants, to help to get rid of them.
8. Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women in the Northern Sung*, (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1981). Also available as an ebook on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).
9. The numbers of positions and the titles for the women varied from dynasty to dynasty.
10. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Li, Empress of Emperor Guangzong of Southern Song', in Lily Lee and Sue Wiles ed., *Biographical Dictionary: Tang through Ming*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2014), 189-190.
11. Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women*, 9.
12. Holmgren, Jennifer, "Imperial marriage in the Native Chinese and non-Han State, Han to Ming" in *Marriage, Kinship and Power in Northern China*, 60.
13. Holmgren, 'Imperial marriage in the Native Chinese and non-Han State, Han to Ming' in *Marriage, Kinship and Power in Northern China*, VII, 58. Also see Jack Weatherford's *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens* (Broadway Paperbacks, 2010).
14. According to Thomas Barfield, the nomads did not prefer to occupy land that they would then have to defend. Barfield, Thomas, *The Perilous Frontier* (Cambridge: B. Blackwell, 1989), 1-8, 51.
15. Edwin G. Pulleyblank, "The Chinese and their Neighbors in Prehistoric and Early Historic Times," in *Central Asia and non-Chinese peoples of ancient China IV*, 411-466 (Aldershot, 2002).
16. According to Charles Holcombe the northern tribes who conquered China were partly sinified and had lived with many Han peoples within their own areas. Their successful conquests of China were due to their being already 'partly sinified' and their rule was more or less acceptable to the Han people within China. Charles Holcombe, 'The Sinification of China,' in *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 B.C. – A.D. 907* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 18-25.
17. J. Michael Farmer, 'Jia Nanfeng, Empress of Emperor Hui of Jin.' In Lily Lee, ed. *Biographical Dictionary: Antiquity through Sui*, 302-307.
18. Priscilla Ching-Chung and Tai Po Ying, 'Lou Zhaojun, Empress of Emperor Shenwu of Northern Qi,' in Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A.D. Stefanowska, ed., *Biographical Dictionary: Antiquity through Sui*, 314-316.
19. Jennifer Holmgren, 'Politics of the Inner Court under the Hou-chu (Last Lord) of the Northern Ch'i, ca. 565-73' in ed. Albert E. Dien, *State and society in early medieval China*, (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1990), 275-303.

20. *Ibid.*
21. 'Secret succession prevailed for the rest of the dynasty.' Evelyn S. Rawski, *The Last Emperors* (Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 1998), 103.
22. Holmgren, 'Observations on Marriage and Inheritance Practices' in *Marriage, kinship, ...*, 151-154.
23. *Ibid.*, 'Family, marriage and political power in 6th Century China ...,' 35-41).
24. *Ibid.*, 'Observations on Marriage and Inheritance Practices,' 151-154.
25. Jack Weatherford, 'Our Daughters are Our Shields, in *The Secret History of Mongol Queens*, 44-66, 2010.
26. The banners were administrative divisions that provided the basic framework for the Manchu military organization.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. John E. Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome: A Study of the Silk Routes during the Later Han Dynasty, First to Second Centuries CE*. (Seattle, WA., BookSurge Publishing, 2009), 5.
2. For more information about Normadic Conquerors, read: Gerard Chaliand, *Nomadic Empires*. Trans, by A. M. Berret, (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2004).
3. [View Map] The empire of Genghis Khan after his death in 1227 AD. Source: "Großer Historischer Weltatlas. Zweiter Teil — Mittelalter", Bayrischer Schulbuch-Verlag 1979, ISBN 3-7627-6112-4, p. 56. Published on Wikimedia Commons by author [Hardcore-Mike](#). Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license](#).
4. [View Map] Topographic map of China, with main mountains, deserts, rivers... Published on Wikimedia Commons by author [Isomon](#). Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license](#).
5. For more information read Denis Sinor, *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Chapter 2.
6. *Ibid*.
7. Thomas J. Barfield, 'The Xiongnu Confederacy: Organization and Foreign Policy.' *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 41, No. 1, Nov, 1981, 45-61.
8. For more information on *heqin*, read: Cui Mingde, *The History of Chinese Heqin: Brief Charts of Heqin Events*. (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2005). (257–300).
9. Wikipedia the free dictionary, accessed October 25, 2013: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heqin>.
10. Shanyu is a title used by the nomadic supreme rulers of Middle and Inner Asia for eight centuries, beginning with the Zhou Dynasty.
11. For information on marriage alliances and this period, read Introduction in *Empresses and consorts: selections from Chen Shou's Records of the Three States* with Pei Songzhi's commentary, translated with annotations and introduction by Robert Joe Cutter and William Gordon Crowell (University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 3-81.
12. Farmer, J. Michael, "Jia Nanfeng, Empress of Emperor Hui of Jin", in Lee, Lily Xiao Hong and Stefanowska, A.D., *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women, Antiquity through Sui*", 302-307.
13. Priscilla Ching-Chung and Tai Po Ying, 'Lou Zhaojun, Empress of Emperor Shenwu of Northern Qi,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui* 314-316..
14. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Yang Lihua, Empress of Emperor Xuan of Northern Zhou,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 368-370.
15. For more information read Denis C. Twitchett, ed., *Cambridge History of China, Sui and T'ang China, 589–906 AD, Part 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Introduction, Chapter 2.
16. Table showing differences between northern and southern China. [View Table]

Notes to Chapter 2

1. Divination is to divine/foretell the future. According to Julia Ching, starting from the late fourth millennium, the Neolithic people in northern China appears to have been the first people anywhere to use animal shoulder blades for divination.
2. Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1993). 46.
3. *Ibid.*, 42.
4. *Ibid.*, 46.
5. *Ibid.*, 46-50.
6. Patricia Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 26-27.
7. Melvin P. Thatcher, "Spring and Autumn Period" in ed., Rubie S. Watson and Patricia E. Buckley, *Marriage and Inequality* (Berkeley, University of California Press, c. 1991), 25-57, 31-32.
8. Thatcher analyzed 150 recorded marriages (125 of them involve members of the ruling households, rulers, their sons, daughters and grandsons) in the Spring and Autumn Annals and the *Zuo Zhuan* (one of the earliest Chinese works of narrative history and covers the period from 722-468 B.C.E 150).
9. *Ibid.*, 31-32
10. Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 46-47.
11. Section on "Ritual Account of birth," in Traditions in Exemplary Women. Accessed October 31, 2013: http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/xwomen/birth_essay.html. .
12. Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, (SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture, 1998), 11-60.
13. Albert R. O'Hara, *The position of women in early China: according to the Lieh Nu Chuan, "The Biographies of Eminent Chinese Women."* (Orient Publishing Company, 1955), 255-285.
14. Most of the book is comprised of materials found in earlier texts, such as the *Zuo Zhuan* and the *Guoyu*. *Guoyu* is a classical history book of ancient China.
15. Albert R. O'Hara, *The position of women in early China*, 255-285.
16. Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, 4-7; O'Hara, *The position of women in early China*, 255-285.
17. Du Fangqin and Susan Mann, "Competing Claims on Womanly Virtue in Late Imperial China" in Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, Joan R. Pigott., *Confucian Cultures in Pre-modern China, Korea and Japan*, (University of California Press), 2003.

Notes to Chapter 3

1. See Bret Hinsch, *Women of Early Imperial China*, (Rowman & Littlefield, Md., 2011), 102.
2. Empress Dowager is the title of the widow of the former emperor. Grand Empress Dowager is the title of the grandmother of the emperor, a former empress.
3. Even women who had begun their careers as slaves in the royal households could become powerful should the boy they had cared for become emperor. A prime example is Lu Lingxuan (d.578), the nurse of Gao Wei (Houzu: 556-78), the fifth and last ruler of Northern Qi (550-77). She got rid of his wife and installed a new empress of her choosing. She got rid of officials that were obstructive and helped the ones who were her allies. Her relatives were all given official positions and while their formal authority was below that of the royal princes they had more access to and influence on the emperor through Lu. From Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Lu Lingxuan,' in Lily Lee and A. D. Stefanowska ed., *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 317-321.
4. Wang Shu-hwai (translated by William Wai-lam Che), 'Lü Zh'i,' in Lily Lee and A. D. Stefanowska ed., *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 174-178.
5. Every man must spend a year laboring for the empire. Rich men paid poor men to take their turn.
6. This was unique; the rule of all other female regencies, even that of Empress Wu, who declared her own dynasty, was recorded under the annals of the nominal emperors.
7. The regents of later dynasties had a more subtle way of ruling behind a screen court, but Lü never did so. Some Han Dynasty regents received officials in full public view at the opposite end of the throne hall and were presented copies of every memorial. Bret Hinsch, 103.
8. Bao Shanben, 'Shangguang, Empress of Emperor Zhao,' in Lily Lee and A. D. Stefanowska ed., *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 187-9.
9. Wang Lihua, 'Chen Jiao, 'Empress of Emperor Wu,' in Lily Lee and A. D. Stefanowska ed., *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 114-115.
10. Wendi was the son of the founding emperor and a concubine, Lady Bo Ji (d.155 B.C.E.). He was brought to court to be emperor after the death of Empress Dowager Lü. Bao Shanben, 'Bo, Consort of Emperor Gaozu,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 107-108. Lady Bo Ji had entered the founder's palace as a slave working in the weaving room and so had no powerful relatives.
11. Bao Shanben, 'Dou Yifang, Empress of Emperor Wen,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 132-136.
12. Bao Shanben, 'Bo, Empress of Emperor Jing,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 109.
13. Bao, Shanben, 'Wang Zhi, Empress of Emperor Jing,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 215-217.
14. Bao Shanben, 'Wei Zhifu, Empress of Emperor Jing,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 217-220. The son of the deceased heir was enthroned by Empress Dowager Shangguang as Emperor Xuandi (r.74-49 B.C.E.).
15. Wudi's successor was Zhaodi whose young widow, Shangguang, was mentioned earlier in this chapter.
16. Wang Xiaowen, 'Xu Pingjun, Empress of Xuandi.' *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 226-7.
17. Wang Xiaowen, 'Huo Chengjun, Empress of Emperor Xuan.' *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 152-3.
18. Bao, Shanben, 'Wang Zhi, Empress of Emperor Jing,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Antiquity through Sui*, 215-217.

19. Wu Jin, 'Xu, Empress of Emperor Cheng,' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Antiquity through Sui*, 224-226.
20. Au Chi-kin (trans., William Wai-lam Che), 'Zhao Feiyan, Empress of Emperor Cheng,' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Antiquity through Sui*, 187-189.
21. Shen Lidong, 'Wang Zhengjun' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Antiquity through Sui*, 212-215. The *History of the Han Dynasty* cites Ban Biao (3-54 C.E.) as saying that the attempt at usurpation was inevitable as the Empress Dowager was the mother of China for 60 years, through four reigns, and power had transferred to her family members — five generals and ten marquises.
22. Mu Meichun, 'Wang, Empress of Emperor Ping.' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Antiquity through Sui*, 201-202.
23. Bret Hinsch, *Women of Early Imperial China*, 104- 105.
24. Chia-Lin Pao (trans., Lu Huici) 'Yin Li-hua, Empress of Emperor Guangwu.' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Antiquity through Sui*, 233-235.
25. The Dou clan had married two of their women into the palace; the first Dou was the Empress of Emperor Zhang and had acted as regent for his successor, Emperor He, for six years. The next Empress Dou was married to Emperor Huan.
26. Bret Hinsch, *Women of Early Imperial China*, 105.
27. Wong Yin Lee, (trans. William Wai-lam Che), 'Deng Sui, Empress of Emperor He,' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Antiquity through Sui*, 122-126.
28. Rafe De Crespigny, 'Liang Na, Empress of Emperor Shun' and 'Liang Nüying, Empress of Emperor Huan' in *Biographical Dictionary ... , Antiquity through Sui*, 157-161.
29. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe ed., *Cambridge History of China: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 BC—AD 220 v. 1*, , 287-290, 367.
30. Yang Haiming, 'Dou, Empress of Emperor Zhang,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... , Antiquity through Sui*, 127-128.
31. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe ed., *Cambridge History*, v. 1, 84-285.
32. De Crespigny, 'Dou Miao, Empress of Emperor Huang,' in Lily Lee and A. D. Stepanowska, ed., *Biographical Dictionary,... Antiquity through Sui*, 128-132.
33. Cutter, Robert Joe and Crowell, William Gordon, *Empresses and consorts: selections from Chen Shou's Records of the Three States with Pei Songzhi's commentary* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 3-81. The legendary Yao had passed his Mandate to Shun by giving him his two daughters in marriage
34. Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Ancient China*, 90-95.
35. *Ibid.*, 53.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. Albert E. Dien has referred to this period as 'Early Medieval China' in his book *State and Society in Early Medieval China*, and David G. Johnson referred to it as 'Medieval China' in his book, *The Medieval Chinese Oligarchy*.
2. Jennifer Holmgren. 'The Harem in Northern Wei Politics, 398-493 AD,' in Holmgren, *Marriage, kinship, and power in northern China*, Variorum Collected Studies Series: CS516 (1955), 80-85.
3. Lau Lai-ming and Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Feng, Empress of Emperor Wencheng of Northern Wei.' in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Antiquity through Sui*, 280-284.
4. Lau and Ching-Chung, Priscilla, 'Hu, Consort of Emperor Xuanwu of Northern Wei,' *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Antiquity through Sui*, 296-300.
5. Laura Long, 'Dugu, Empress of Emperor Wen of Sui,' *Biographical Dictionary .. through Sui*, 275-278.
6. Kenneth Douglas Klein, *The Contributions of the Fourth Century Xianbei States to the Reunification of the Chinese Empire* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press), 111-119.
7. According to Jennifer Holmgren, history was not kind to Feng You who was given the blackest profile possible All the vices of "suspicion, jealousy, immorality, deceit, ruthlessness, and ambition were attributed to her whereas her half-sister, the deposed empress was portrayed as a 'model of saintly virtue-unobtrusive and compliant.'" Feng You is also known as Feng Run.
8. The Erzhu clan had been given a large fief by the Northern Wei as a reward for helping the Tuoba at the end of the 4th century They controlled the major source of supply of animals and fodder for the N Wei armies and by the end of the 5th century, they were very wealthy The Erzhu and the Tuoba royal families were blood relatives through intermarriage beginning from the time of Tuoba Huang, father of Emperor Gaozong (r.453-465).

Notes to Chapter 5

1. Parts of southern China, belonging to the aborigines, were conquered by the Tang and to this day people living in these areas refer to themselves as people of the Tang (Tang ren).
2. For information about the background of the Li family see Biography of 'Li, Princess Pingyang,' by Liu Ning and Lily Xiao Hong Lee, in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Tang through Ming*, ed. by Lily Lee and Sue Wiles (M.E. Sharpe, 2014), 198-200.
3. [\[View Map\]](#) Tang Dynasty circa 700 CE. Author: Ian Kiu. Published on Wikimedia Commons by copyright holder [Pojnji](#). Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license](#).
4. See next chapter for biographies of powerful Tang women.
5. Jowen R. Tung, *Fables for Patriarchs: Gender Politics in Tang Discourse* (Rowan & Littlefield), 2000.
6. Liu Ning and Sue Wiles, (trans., Yuk Ping Chan), 'Shangguan Wan'er,' in *Ibid.* 336-340, in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 198-200.
7. Jowen R. Tung, Chapter 2: Fate of the Imperial Daughters', in *Fables for Patriarchs*.
8. *Ibid.*, Chapter 4. 'Women were the most precious gift of exchange—for political favors and religious blessings, sent as tribute, and used for marriage alliances.'
9. Liu Ning and Sue Wiles, (trans. by Jennifer Eagleton), 'Li, Princess Jinxian,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 197-198.
10. Liu Ning and Lily Xiaohong Lee, (trans. by Jennifer Eagleton), 'Li, Princess Pingyang,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 198-200.
11. The "Women's Army" was so named as it was led by a woman.
12. Liu Ning and Lily Xiao Hong Lee, (trans. By Jennifer Eagleton), 'Li, Princess Pingyang,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 198-200.
13. Lily Xiaohong Lee, 'Li, Princes Taiping,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 201-203.
14. Chen Shangjun, (trans. by Laura Long), 'Li, Princess Anle', in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 191-193.
15. Liu Ning and Sue Wiles, (trans. by Jennifer Eagleton), 'Li, Princess Jinxian,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 197-198.
16. Liu Ning and Sue Wiles, (translated by Jennifer Eagleton), 'Li, Princess Yuzhen,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 205-207.
17. Liu Ning, (trans. by Jennifer Eagleton), 'Lee, Princess Hezheng, *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 193-194.
18. Liu Ning, (trans., Lily Xiaohong Lee), 'Li, Princess Hanyang,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 212-213.
19. Jennifer W. Jay, 'Li, Princess Wencheng,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 204-205.
20. Jennifer W. Jay, 'Li, Princess Jincheng', in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 194-196.
21. Denis Sinor, 'Sending princesses to nomads,' *Studies in Medieval Inner Asia*, V, 18-19.
22. [\[View Map\]](#) Five Dynasties Ten Kingdoms Period 923 CE. Published on Wikimedia Commons by author [Ian Kiu](#). Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license](#).
23. There are different dynasties named Jin. The first dynasty named Jin used the Chinese character meaning 'advance.' That dynasty was ruled by ethnic Han Chinese whereas the Later Jin, using the same character, was ruled by Non-Hans. The Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) used the Chinese character meaning 'gold.' It was also ruled by non-Hans.

24. For more information on the Five Dynasties and detailed biographies of individuals, see Richard L. Davis' translation and introduction of *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)
25. Richard L. Davis, *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 131, 162-167, 176-177.
26. Chen Shangjun, (trans., Cui Zhiying), 'Chen Jinfeng, Empress of Emperor Taizong of Min,' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Tang through Ming*, 35-36.
27. Liu Ning, (trans., Jennifer Eagleton), 'Zhou Ehuang, Empress of Emperor Houzhu of Southern Tang,' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Tang through Ming*, 629-630.
28. Chen Shangjun, (trans., Cui Zhiying), 'Xu, Grand Consort of Former Shu,' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Tang through Ming*, 500-502.
29. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Political Power and Social Prestige of Palace Women in the Northern Sung (960-1127)'. A dissertation presented to the graduate Faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, 1977, UMI, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Notes to Chapter 6

1. During the Tang, a peasant woman, Chen Shuozhen (d.653), leader of a peasant rebellion, also had declared herself emperor during the early part of the Tang Dynasty. She said she had ascended into heaven and had become immortal, then returned to earth to correct wrongs in society. She had an army of 40,000-50,000 and occupied many areas in several different provinces. Eventually she was captured and executed. Li Xiaolin, *Women in the Chinese Military* (UMI Dissertation Series, 1995), 128.
2. Chinese history never recognized her reign and regarded it as a period within the Tang Dynasty so there are no official dates or history for the Zhou Dynasty.
3. The Tang imperial family had claimed their descent from the founder of Daoism, Lao Zi, and had made Daoism the state religion. As emperor, Wu gained the support of Buddhists by elevating Buddhism to the same status as Daoism.
4. Zhongzong formally ascended the throne after the death of his mother.
5. Liu Ning (trans., Henry Shaoyuan Cui), 'Zhangzon, Empress of Emperor Taizong of Tang,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 606-60a7.
6. Liu Ning, (trans. by Henry Shaoyuan Cui), 'Wang, Demoted Empress of Emperor Gaozong of the Tang,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 408-409.
7. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consort_Xiao. Accessed June 8, 2014.
8. Chen Shangjun and Lily Xiao Hong Lee, (trans., Laura Long), 'Wei, Empress of Emperor Zhongzong of the Tang,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 437-439.
9. The Old History of Tang was compiled during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period (907-960/979) while the New History of Tang was commissioned in 1044 and compiled in the Song Dynasty (960-1279).
10. Liu Ning, (trans., Henry Shaoyuan Cui), 'Zhang, Demoted Empress of Emperor Suzong of Tang,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 578-9.
11. Liu Ning, (trans. Henry Shaoyang Cui), 'Guo, Empress of Xianzong,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 105-106.
12. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empress_Dowager_Zheng, accessed 12/29/2015.
13. The Romanization for this emperor Xuanzong and the earlier emperor, Xuanzong, is the same but the Chinese characters are very different. The first Xuan means 'profound' and the second Xuan means 'announce.'
14. Liu Ning, (trans. Jennifer Eagleton), 'He, Empress of Emperor Zhaozong of the Tang,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 125.
15. Zhu Wen was the founder of the first of the Five Dynasties after the fall of Tang.
16. For more information about Tang women, read 'Tang Consorts' listed in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, xxviii.
17. Liu Ning, (trans. Henry Shaoyuan Cui), 'Xu Hui, Worthy Consort of Emperor Taizong of Tang,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 508-509.
18. Lily Xiaohong Lee, 'Jiang Caiping,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 168-170.
19. Sally A. (Rubenstein) Robin, 'Yang, Honored Consort of Xuanzong,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 536-540.
20. The other three are: Xi Shi (c.506 B.C.E.), Diao Chan (c.172), and Zhao Feiyan (c.32-1 BC). Xi Shi and Diao Chan may be fictional.
21. Li Mao was the eighteenth son of Xuanzong.
22. One of Yang's sisters was arrested, forced to kill her own children before killing herself.
23. For more information on advancement of palace women, see Chapter IV of Priscilla Ching-Chung's *Palace Women in the Northern Sung*, (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1981). Also available as an ebook on amazon.com.

Notes to Chapter 7

1. [\[View Map\]](#)China during the Northern Song Dynasty. Published on Wikimedia Commons by author [Mozzan](#). Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license](#).
2. [\[View Map\]](#)China during the Southern Song Dynasty. Published on Wikimedia Commons by author [Mozzan](#). Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license](#).
3. Priscilla Ching-Chung, "Introduction" in *Palace Women of the Northern Sung*, 3.
4. The Jurchen eventually withdrew to their homelands and their descendants changed their name to Manchu; conquered China and established the Manchu Qing Dynasty in 1644.
5. Richard L. Davis, in Denis C. Twitchett and Paul Jacov ed., *Cambridge History of China*, v. 5. *The Sung Dynasty and its Precursors, 907–1279, Part 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Chapter 12.
6. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Zhao Supreme Princess of Zhou and Chen States', *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 612-614.
7. For more information, read: John Chaffee, 'Marriage of Sung Imperial Clanswomen,' in *Marriage and Inequality*. Zhang Bangwei, 'Song princesses and their husbands' in *Songdai huangqint yü zhengzhi* (Sichuan renmin chuban she), 90-121
8. Jennifer Holmgren, 'Marriage, Kinship and Succession under the Ch'i-tan Rulers of the Liao Dynasty (907-1125)' in Jennifer Holmgren, *Marriage, Kinship* V, 44-91.

Notes to Chapter 8

1. It could be due to the fact that the historical records were kept in the language of Xi Xia and few can decipher it. The available information is from Chinese records.
2. The Liao army was made up of three pillars—ordo, tribe, and militia.
3. Patricia Ebrey, 'Xiang, Empress of Emperor Shenzong of Northern Song,' in Lily Lee and Sue Wiles ed., *Biographical Dictionary Tang through Ming*, 477-481.
4. Li Meng, 'Shulü Ping, Empress of Emperor Taizu of Liao,' *Biographical Dictionary Tang through Ming*, 364-367
5. Li Meng, 'Xiao Chuo, Empress of Jingzong of Liao,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 481-484; Holmgren, Jennifer, "Marriage, Kinship and Succession under the Ch'i-tan Rulers of the Liao Dynasty (907-1125)" in Jennifer Holmgren, *Marriage, Kinship*, 44-91.
6. Zhang Bangwei, *Songdai Huangqing yü Zhengzhi*, 143-145.
7. The only exception was Empress Li of the Later Han, during the Five Dynasties Period, who was regent for a month. She then turned over power to Guo Wei, the founder of the Later Zhou.
8. Chaffee, John, "The Rise and Regency of Empress Liu", *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 31 (2001).
9. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Liu, Empress of Emperor Chengzong of Northern Song,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 254-257. Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women*, 47, 66, 69-72.
10. Before assuming the regency, Liu had governed for two years in her husband's name as Zhenzong was not in good health.
11. Yin privilege is the right of a family member to enter the civil service at a low-level staff position. This gave them the benefit of earning experience as well as a career path and by-passing the need to pass the civil service examination.
12. Renzong was furious when he found that Liu had deceived him. His wrath was eased when he opened the coffin of his biological mother and found that she had died from natural causes and was buried, properly dressed, befitting the mother of an emperor.
13. Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women*, 28-30, 47, 66, 69-72.
14. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Gao, Empress of Emperor Yingzong of Northern Song,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 77-80. Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women*, 28, 70, 91-95.
15. Hiroshi Chiba, 'Kao Huang-hou,' 494-498; Hiroshi Chiba, Julia Ching (trans.) 'Kao Tsun-yü,' 507-510, in Herbert Franke, ed., *Sung Biographies*, v. 2 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1976).
16. Empress Meng would assume an important role after the fall of the Northern Song. Not having been in the royal palaces, she was not captured by the Jin (Gold) forces and was able to support the last remaining imperial prince and declare her support for him as empress. She then became the Empress Dowager and assumed regency twice for short durations.
17. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Cao, Empress of Renzong of Northern Song,' in *Biographical Dictionary....: Tang through Ming*, 18-20. Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women*, 74-75.
18. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Zhang, Consort of Renzong of Northern Song,' *Biographical Dictionary....: Tang through Ming*, 576-578; Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women*, 48, 91-95.
19. Yingzong had been adopted as there was no heir to the throne. He was brought up by Cao since the age of four and succeeded to the throne at the age of 32.
20. Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women*, 28-9, 75-6.
21. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Meng, Empress of Emperor Zhezong of Northern Song,'

Biographical Dictionary...: Tang through Ming, 288-290.

22. Patricia Ebrey, 'Empress Xiang (1046–1101) and Biographical Sources beyond Formal Biographies' in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Cultural Politics and Women's Biography in China*, edited by Hu Ying and Joan Judge (University of California Press, 2011), 193-211. Ebrey's biography showed that the regent was not just endorsing a recommendation from the officials; on the contrary, she rejected a recommendation and insisted on her own choice of Huizong and he was proclaimed emperor.

23. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Xie Daoqing, Empress of Lizong of Southern Song,' *Biographical Dictionary...: Tang through Ming*, 489-492; Fang Hao, *Sung-shih* 5, 1/243/15b-16b; Priscilla Ching-Chung & H. Chiba, "Hsieh Huang-Hou," in *Sung Biographies*, 410-412, *A Compilation of Anecdotes*, 720-728; Jennifer W. Jay, *A Change in Dynasties: Loyatism in Thirteenth Century China*. (Western Washington University, 1991), 9, 29-37, 248.

24. Noble Consort Jia had the emperor's favor. At court, it was gossiped that instead of installing the true empress, they were naming the false empress. The emperor loved Jia so much that he appointed her younger brother, Jia Sidao as Chief Council in 1259. Jia gave birth to the emperor's only surviving daughter whom he loved and when the latter married, he built her a home just outside his palace so he could go for informal visits. Richard L. Davis, *Wind Against the Mountain*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 42.

25. Richard L. Davis, *Wind Against the Mountain*, 32–36, 61–69, 117–22, 208.

26. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Quan, Empress of Duzong of Southern Song,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 324-326.

27. Richard L. Davis, *Wind Against the Mountain*, 38-9, 116-122, 179.

Notes to Chapter 9

1. The non-Han Xianbei of the Northern Wei conquered and united Northern China; the non-Han Sui conquered Southern China after Sui was already established in the North. The Mongols conquered all of China invading directly from their homeland.
2. [\[View Map\]](#) This map shows the boundary of 13th century Mongol Empire and location of today's Mongols in modern Mongolia, Russia and China. Published on Wikimedia Commons by user [Khoikhoi](#). Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license](#).
3. Holmgren, 'Observations on Marriage and Inherited Practices in Early Mongol and Yuan Society, with particular Reference to the Levirate,' in *Marriage, Kinship*, 172-174.
4. Barfield, "*The Perilous Frontier*", Ch. 7, 'Steppe Wolves and Forest Tigers,' 250-294.
5. The Mongol armies are made up of the Mongol conquerors from their homeland as well as of their conquered peoples. The original troops refers to the troops from the Mongol homeland.
6. Xu Shiduan, (trans., Janine Burns), 'Toregene, Empress of Mongol Emperor Taizong,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 401-403.
7. Xu Shiduan, (trans., Janine Burns), 'Sorqoqtani, Empress of Mongol Emperor Ruiizong,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 376-379.
8. Xu Shiduan, (trans., Janine Burns), Chabui, Empress of Emperor Shizu, Quibilai Khan, *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 23-26.
9. Thomas Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 219-220; 22-226.
10. Thomas Barfield, 'The Yuan Dynasty,' in *Perilous Frontier*.
11. Marco Polo, *The travels of Marco Polo: the Venetian*, ed. Manuel Komroff (New York: Liveright, W. N. Norton & Company, 1982), p. 125.
12. The best source for Korean women as tribute to the Yuan can be found in Xi, Lei, *Yuandai Gaoli gongnuzhidu yanjiu* (Research on the system of Korean Women as Tribute to the Yuan), (Beijing Shi : Min zu chu ban she, 2003).
13. *Ibid*.
14. Xu Shiduan (trans., Jaime Burns), 'Kokejin,' in *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 182-184.
15. Xu Shiduan, (trans., Janine Burns), 'Bulughan, Empress of Emperor Chengtong of Yuan,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 16-18.
16. Xu Shiduan, (trans., Janine Burns), 'Budashiri, Empress of Emperor Wenzong of Yuan,' *Ibid.*, 14-16.
17. Xu Shiduan, (trans., Janine Burns), 'Chabui, Empress of Emperor Shizu, Kublai Khan,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 23-26.
18. Xu Shiduan, (trans., Janine Burns), 'Tagi,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang through Ming*, 387-390.
19. The Mongols were driven back to their homelands and the rebels established the Ming Dynasty returning the rule of all of China to Han Chinese emperors.
20. Polygyny is a system where a man could have many equal wives, that is, wives of equal status rather than the Chinese system in which there is a principal wife and a number of concubines who are subservient to the principal wife.
21. Principal wives come from the same social status as the husband while concubines may be maids, purchased entertainers, or former slaves.
22. Jennifer Holmgren, 'Observations on Marriage and Inheritance Practices in Early Mongol and Yuan Society,' with particular reference to the Levirate in *Marriage, Kinship and Power in Northern China*, Part III, 127-192, 184.
23. The Chinese woman kept her surname even unto death. Her tombstone bore the name of her birth family and not that of her husband's family.
24. Jennifer Holmgren, 'Observations on Marriage and Inheritance Practices in Early

Mongol and Yuan Society' in *Marriage, Kinship and Power in Northern China*, Part III, 127-192, 184.

25. *Ibid*, 188.

26. Fangqin Du and Susan Mann, 'Competing Claims on Womanly Virtue in Late Imperial China,' in *Women in Confucian Cultures in Pre-modern China, Korea and Japan* (University of California Press, 2003).

27. *Ibid*.

Notes to Chapter 10

1. For more information on dowry practices, see Patricia Buckley Ebrey, 'Chapter 5: Dowries,' in *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 99-113.
2. In China, rebels are usually referred to as bandits unless they are successful in establishing a new dynasty.
3. Ebrey commented, 'Seldom has the course of Chinese history been influenced by a single personality as much as it was by the founder of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang. His rise to power was fast despite his having a poor and humble origin. In 11 years he went from being a penniless monk to the most powerful warlord in China; five years later, he became emperor of China.' in Patricia Ebrey, *Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, 190. Frederick w. Mote and Denis Twitchett, ed., *Cambridge History of China*, vo. 7, *The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11-15.
4. [\[View Map\]](#) This map shows the route of the 7th voyage of Zheng He. Published on Wikimedia Commons by user [Vmenkov](#). Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license](#).
5. The voyages were referred to as the travels of "Eunuch Sanbao to the Western Ocean" or "Zheng He to the Western Ocean," (1405-1433).
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zheng_He, Wikipedia, accessed 7/23/2015.
7. L. Carrington Goodrich & Chaoying Fang, ed., *Dictionary of Ming biography, 1368-1644* (Columbia University Press, 1976), v.2, 723-4.
8. This practice shows the influence of non-Han practices and traditions on the Han Chinese.
9. Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors*, 162-194. For more information about eunuchs in the Ming, read Robert B. Crawford, *Eunuch Power in the Ming Dynasty*.
10. Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search For Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 25, 32-33.
11. Gertraude Li Roth, 'State Building before 1644,' in Willard J. Peterson, (ed.), *Cambridge History of China, Vol. 9, Part 1: The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 27-72; Ramon H. Myers and Yeh-Chien Wang, "Economic Developments, 1644-1800, in *Cambridge History of China*, v. 9, 641-645; Frederic Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China*, (California and London: University of California Press, 1985), 158-160.
12. The eight banners were administrative divisions into which all Manchu families were placed. They provided the basic framework for the Manchu military organization.
13. The law on forbidding foot binding was enacted in 1902 at the request of the Han Chinese reformist leaders who felt that foot-binding was the reason why China was weak and behind the west. They felt women with bound feet gave birth to weak children.
14. Yu, Shampu (trans. Wang, Lilian), "Empress Xiao Zhuang Wen of the Borjigit Clan" in Lee, Lily Xiao Hong and Stefanowska, A.D. Editors-in-Chief; Ho, Clara Wing-chung, Qing Period Editor, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Qing Period*, (M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 339-342.
15. *Ibid*.
16. Of the eleven Manchu emperors who ruled from 1644 to 1911 only one (the Daoguang emperor, son of Jiaqing emperor) was the son of an empress. The birth mothers of emperors Yongzheng, Qianlong, Jiaqing came from lowly servant backgrounds.
17. Yu, Shampu and Wiles, Sue (trans. Lilian Wang.), "Empress Xiao Qin Xian of the

Yehe Nara Clan” in *Biographical Dictionary ... The Qing Period*, 362-366.

Notes to Chapter 11

1. For detailed information, see Priscilla Ching-Chung's *Palace Women in the Northern Sung*, (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1981). Also available as an ebook on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)
2. The Qianqing Palace known in English as the Palace of Heavenly Purity is a palace in the Forbidden City. During the Ming and Qing, all of the fourteen Ming emperors lived in this hall.
3. The Rijing Gate is the southeast gate after three palace courtyards. It is one of the main gates.
4. The Yuehua Gate is a southern gate.
5. "Imperial Marriages of the Ming Dynasty," Ellen F. Soulliere, in *Papers in Far Eastern History*, 1988, 37:1542.
6. The Korean court also sent women as tribute to the Yuan.
7. Wang Chongwu (1948), 1948, "*Ming Chengzu shengmu kao*"
8. Lin Yanqing, (trans., Lily Xiao Hong Lee), 'Quan, Consort of the Yongle Emperor, Chengzu, of Ming', *Biographical Dictionary ... , Tang through Ming*, 323-324.
9. Wang Chongwu, "*Ming Chengzu shengmu kao*" (1948).
10. The author is indebted to Ellen Soulliere as much of the information on Ming imperial palace women was from her dissertation on Palace Women in the Ming Dynasty.
11. Lin Yanqing, (trans., Lily Xiao Hong Lee), 'Zhang, Empress of the Hongxi Emperor, Renzong,' *Biographical Dictionary ... Tang thorough Ming*, 580-582.
12. Lin Yanqing, (trans., Lily Xiao Hong Lee), 'Zhang, Empress of the Hongzhi Emperor, Xiaozong,' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Tang through Ming*, 582-583.
13. Lin Yanqing, (trans. Lily Xiao Hong Lee), 'Wan, Honored Consort of Ming', *Biographical Dictionary ... , Tang through Ming*, 407-408.
14. Li Yanqing, (trans., Sheung Yee Lee), 'Ke, Madam, *Biographical Dictionary ... , Tang through Ming*, 178-180.
15. Liu Ning, (trans., Henry Shaoyuan Cu)i, 'Guo, Consort of the Hongwu Emperor, Taizu of Ming,' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Tang through Ming.*, 103.
16. Lin Yanqing, (trans., Lily Xiao Hong Lee), 'Fang, Empress of the Jiajing Emperor, Shizong, of Ming,' *Biographical Dictionary ... , Tang through Ming*, 59-61
17. L. Carrington Goodrich, 'Koffler, Andreas Wolfgang,' Carrington Goodrich and Fang Chaoying ed., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, 1368-1644 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 722-4.
18. Rawski, 127-130
19. *Ibid.*, 156. According to Rawski, when a married princess died, she was returned to be buried in the imperial grounds; this seems to differ from steppe marriages where the married woman becomes a member of her husband's tribe. For more information read Jack Weatherford, *Mongol Queens*.
20. The Ming dealt with this by selecting the eldest son of the empress as heir apparent when he was very young and all other sons were banned from political participation and sent to reside for life on estates in the provinces.
21. Rawski, 96-126.
22. The Borjigit clan is descended from the Mongol Yuan royal family.
23. Rawski, 96-126.
24. Rawski, 146-7. The largest number of marriages, over fifty-eight percent, were with Mongols.
25. *Ibid.*, 130-1
26. *Ibid.*, 131.
27. *Ibid.*, 127-159
28. *Ibid.*, 135.
29. *Ibid.*, 133-135.

30. Yu Shanpu (trans, by Wang Lilian), 'Empress Xiao Zhuang Wen of the Borjigit Clan,' *Biographical Dictionary, The Qing Period*, 339-342.
31. Yu Shanpu and Sue Wiles. 'Empress Xiao Qin Xian of the Yehe Nara clan,' *Biographical Dictionary, The Qing Period*, 362 -366.
32. She is probably best known as many westerners were in China during that time and were familiar with her power.
33. Yu Shanpu (trans, by Lilian Wang), 'Empress Xiao Zhen Xian of the Niohuru clan,' in *Biographical Dictionary, The Qing Period, 1644-1911*, 360-362.
34. Guangxu's father was the brother of the Xianfeng emperor. His mother was the sister of Cixi.
35. Yu Shanpu and Sue Wiles. 'Empress Xiao Qin Xian of the Yehe Nara clan,' *Biographical Dictionary, The Qing Period*, 362 -366; Yu Shanpu (trans, by Lilian Wang), 'Empress Xiao Ding Jing of the Nara clan,' in *Biographical Dictionary, The Qing Period*, 367-369.
36. On 4 November 2008, forensic tests revealed that the level of arsenic in the Guangxu Emperor's remains was 2,000 times higher than that of ordinary people. Scientists concluded that the poison could only be administered in a high dose at one time. *China Daily* quoted a historian, Dai Yi, who speculated that Cixi may have known of her imminent death and may have feared that Guangxu would continue his reforms after her death (report from CNN November 4, 2008, "Arsenic killed Chinese emperor, report says"). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guangxu_Emperor. . Accessed 7/23/2015.
37. Puyi's great grandfather was the father of Emperor Xianfeng.
38. Yu, Shanpu (trans, by Wang Lilian), 'Empress Xiao Xiao Ding Jing of the Nehe Nara clan,' in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women, The Qing Period*, 367-369.
39. Rawski, 129.
40. Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex Law and Society in Late Imperial China* (California: Stanford University Press), Ch. 6, 7.
41. *Ibid*.

Notes to Epilog

1. A preliminary draft of this chapter was published entitled 'Women and Power: The Changing Status of Women' in *Willow Catkins*, The Oriental Society of Australia, (Sydney, Australia, 2014), 181-210.
2. Patricia Ebrey, "Lady Hao's Tomb." The Cambridge Illustrated History of China. (Cambridge University Press 2006), 26-27; H.G. Creel, *Origins of Statecraft* (University of Chicago Press, 1970), 32.
3. Used as currency.
4. Creel, 130, 394.
5. The poem says, "the beautiful wife blazes, now in possession of her place," Creel, 129.
6. Creel, 129-131.
7. Prejudice against women in government was present in many dynasties with different ones trying different methods to curtail the power of women and their relatives. Northern Wei Dynasty had a law requiring the mother of the heir to commit suicide. Under the Ming Dynasty, no woman from a powerful family could be recruited into the palace.
8. Tai, Yen-Hui, 'Divorce in Traditional China Law' in David C. Bauxbaum, ed., Chinese family law and social change in historical and comparative perspective (University of Washington Press, 1978), 75-106.
9. Patricia Buckley Ebrey, "Dowries," in *The Inner Quarters* (University of California Press, 1998), 107-109. John W. Chaffee, 'Song women 'were much better off than they were in the Ming and Qing dynasties in their legal status, marriage practices, and the popularity of widow remarriage and foot binding.' in 'Marriage of Clanswomen,' in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, ed. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (University of California Press, Berkeley), 160.
10. "'Letter to my sons'" by Gu Ruopu," trans. by Dorothy Ko in *Under Confucian Eyes*, 149-153.
11. Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Orbis, 1993), 167-8.
12. Richard L. Davis, "Chaste and Filial Women in Chinese Historical Writings of the Eleventh Century," (*Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 121.2, 2001), 204-217. In an email to the author, dated, April 3, 2013, Davis opines that 'a more important factor was the movement of elite families from rural estates to urban centers. There was less need to regulate women or worry about the activities outside the home when they lived in remote areas as was common up through the Tang dynasty. Song men were likely to spend most of their adult lives away from their homes, as professional scholar officials, another factor that figured into their insecurity about happenings at home. The increased number of books regulating women, and even foot-binding, emerges in precisely this context of 'husband-absent homes.'
13. Davis, 212.
14. The *New History of the Tang* was compiled and presented to the Song emperor in 1060 while the *Old History of the Tang* was presented to the Jin emperor in 945.
15. Davis, 214.
16. Davis, 205.
17. Cannibalism is also found in an account of a loyalist who killed his concubine so that her flesh could feed his starving troops and that this act inspired others to kill approximately thirty thousand persons, such as slaves, women, the weak, and the elderly for food. 'These actions imply the inferior status of women cannibalized along with slaves,' Davis, 207.
18. Davis, 20-9.
19. Jennifer Holmgren, 'Observations on Marriage and Inheritance Practices in Early Mongol and Yuan Society with particular reference to the Levirate' in

- Marriage, Kinship and Power in Northern China, (Variorum, 1996) III, 188-189.
20. Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Women, Politics, and Society' in *Palace Women in the Northern Sung*, (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1981), 88-89. Also available as an ebook on amazon.com
21. In the Qing, parents and grandparents were required to prostrate themselves before the imperial women, 'Imperial Women' in Evelyn S. Rawski, *The Last Emperors* (University of California Press, 1998), 127-159.
22. During the Song, the emperors said that princesses should be respectful to their in-laws in Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women*, 88-89.
23. For more information see Julia Ching, 'Li Qingzhao' in Herbert Kracke, ed. *Sung Biographies* (Weisbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1976), v. 3, 330-539.
24. Yu-yin Cheng, 'Personal Letters in Seventeenth Century Epistolary Guides' in *Under Confucian Eyes*, 155-168.
25. The author was asked by the dictionary editors to translate, expand, and edit the submissions and so had access to the materials. Selection of these persons was done by the editors of the dictionary project.
26. A type of degree offered by ancient Chinese Imperial Examination to select the best potential candidates to serve as civil officials.
27. Zheng Bijun, trans. by Priscilla Ching-Chung, 'Xie Ximeng, in *Biographical Dictionary, Tang through Ming*, 494-5.
28. The Chinese classics were the subject of mandatory study by Confucian scholars who wished to take the Imperial examinations.
29. Zheng Bijun, trans., Sheung Yee Li, 'Hu Shuxiu,' in *Biographical Dictionary, Tang through Ming*, 135-7.
30. Zheng Bijun, trans., Sheung Yee Li, 'Cheng, Su Xun's wife,' in *Biographical Dictionary, Tang through Ming*, 39-41.
31. Zheng Bijun and Sue Wiles, trans., Sheung Yee Li, 'I Wa, Yue Fei's wife,' in *Biographical Dictionary, Tang through Ming*, 226-8.
32. Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 46-50.
33. Diana Y. Paul, "Introduction," (University of California Press, 1985); Catherine Despeaux and Livia Kohn, 'Conclusion' in *Women in Daoism*, 244-251.
34. Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 22, 167-168; Li Chenyang, 'How a Care Ethics Could have Oppressed Women,' *The Tao Encounters the West: Explorations in Comparative Philosophy*, (SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture, 1999), 108-114.
35. Marina S. Sung, 'The Chinese Lieh-nü Tradition,' in Richard W. Guisso and Stanley Johannesen, ed., *Women in China*, (Philco Press, Youngstown, N.Y., 1981), 63-74.
36. Lily Xiao Hong Lee, *The Virtue of Yin* (Wild Peony Pty, Ltd., 1994), 12-13.
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39. A.F.P. Hulsewé, *Remnants of Ch'in Law* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1985), 2.
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42. Adult women had the right to own property, given to her by her family as dowry, usually half of the amount given to her brothers until the Mongols changed the practice during the Yuan Dynasty.
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46. T'ai Yen-Hui, "Divorce in Traditional China Law", 75-106.
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49. Ibid.
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55. Li, 'Women Leaders of Peasant Uprisings' in dissertation on *Women in the Chinese Military*, 127-132.
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62. Priscilla Ching-Chung, Chapter Four 'Advancement,' *Palace Women*, 39-78.
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64. Non-Hans practiced polygyny and had equal wives.
65. Heqin in Chinese means peace and kinship.
66. Chayu/Shanyu is a title used by the nomadic supreme rulers of Middle and Inner Asia for eight centuries, beginning with the Zhou Dynasty.
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69. Non-Hans regard marriages as alliances and they both married out as well as took in women who were of different tribes and races.
70. Zhang Bangwei, *Huangdai*, 117-118.
71. A string of cash means 1,000 cash.
72. Princess is the daughter of the emperor; Elder princess (*zhang*) is the sister of the emperor; Great Elder princess (*dazhang*) is the aunt of the emperor.
73. The elite Chinese woman was educated at home; some clans operated schools for boys but there were no schools for girls.
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80. Hsu Shih-hsien, in Wikipedia the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hsu_Shih-hsien, accessed September 14, 2013.
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83. 'Executive Council, Hong Kong, Special Administration Region of the People's Republic of China,' *Ibid.*, <http://www.ceo.gov.hk/exco/eng/membership.html>, accessed 6/4/2016..
84. 'CEDAW Report,' on http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/CEDAW.C.CHN.MAC.7-8_en.pdf. Accessed Jan, 14, 2013. Many thanks to the Equal Opportunities Commission in Hong Kong for assistance in finding the website and accessing the information.
85. The previous politburo had only one woman so the current membership of two is actually doubling that of the previous one.
86. '18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,' Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/18th_National_Congress_of_the_Communist_Party_of_China; accessed 9/23/2013. 'China Unveils new cabinet amid function reform, 2013/3/19', The Commissioner's Office of China's Foreign Ministry in the Hong Kong S.A.R, <http://www.fmccprc.gov.hk/eng/xwtd/jzzh/t1022442.htm>, accessed 1/15/2013.
87. Before 1971, the seat in the UN was occupied by the Government in Taiwan.
88. To date, the United States has not signed CEDAW. If signed, federal and state laws would need to be passed to implement it.
89. Not many NGOs file shadow reports on the China Reports.
90. According to the CEDAW committee 'Reports which have been submitted by states parties recently may not have been issued publicly due to many factors including the need for translation, and the practice of some treaty bodies regarding time lines for publication of reports in advance of their consideration.' See CEDAW statement on: http://www.bayefsky.com/docs.php/area/reports/treaty/cedaw/opt/0/state/36/node/4/filename/china_cedaw_c_chn_7_8_2012_adv_ch, accessed September 23, 2013.
91. Report can be found on website: at: http://www.bayefsky.com/docs.php/area/reports/treaty/cedaw/opt/0/state/36/node/4/filename/china_cedaw_c_chn_7_8_2012_adv_ch, accessed September 23, 2013.
92. This particular complaint has appeared in every comment the CEDAW Committee has made on China Reports. For other comments see: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw36/cc/CHINA_advance%20unedited.pdf
93. At the turn of the 21st century, Taiwanese women held about a fifth of the seats in the legislative *Yuan* (parliament). In 2009, they comprised 33 out of 113; or

29.2%. For the KMT, 20 out of 80 (or 25%) were female representatives; for the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party), 12 out of 27 or (44.4%) were female. Smaller parties have only a handful of women in the legislature. As of 2012, the numbers of women had climbed even higher; 33% of the representatives were women. 14 women were DPP members; 20 KMT members and 3 belonged to other Parties. See Joyce Gelb, 'Women. Politics and Leadership in Taiwan and Japan,' (September 2, 2009). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1467085>.

North-South Differences

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	North	South
Land	Ravaged by war	Usurpations due to intrigues in court and not due to war
Population	Millions killed by wars; Many mixed ethnic groups due to mixed marriages	Untouched by war; No mixed marriages and so either Han along coastline or aborigines in wilderness
Climate	Not as conducive to agriculture	Conducive to agriculture
Culture	Mixed Han and non-Han	Distinctive Han

Maps

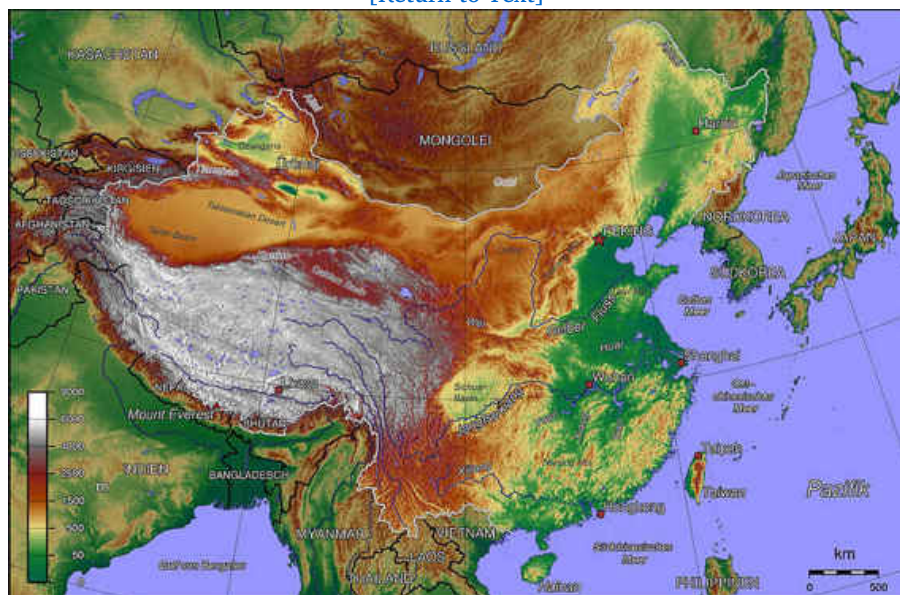
Mongol Empire at the Death of Ghengis Khan

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Topographic Map of China

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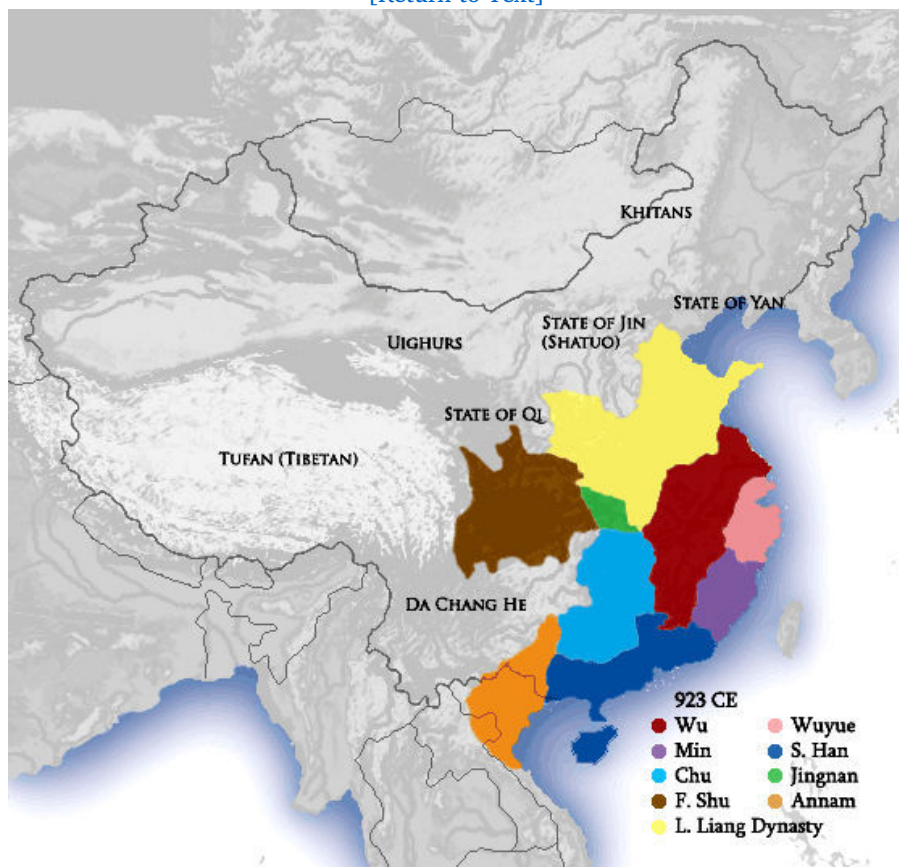
Tang Dynasty circa 700 CE

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Five Dynasties Ten Kingdoms Period 923 CE

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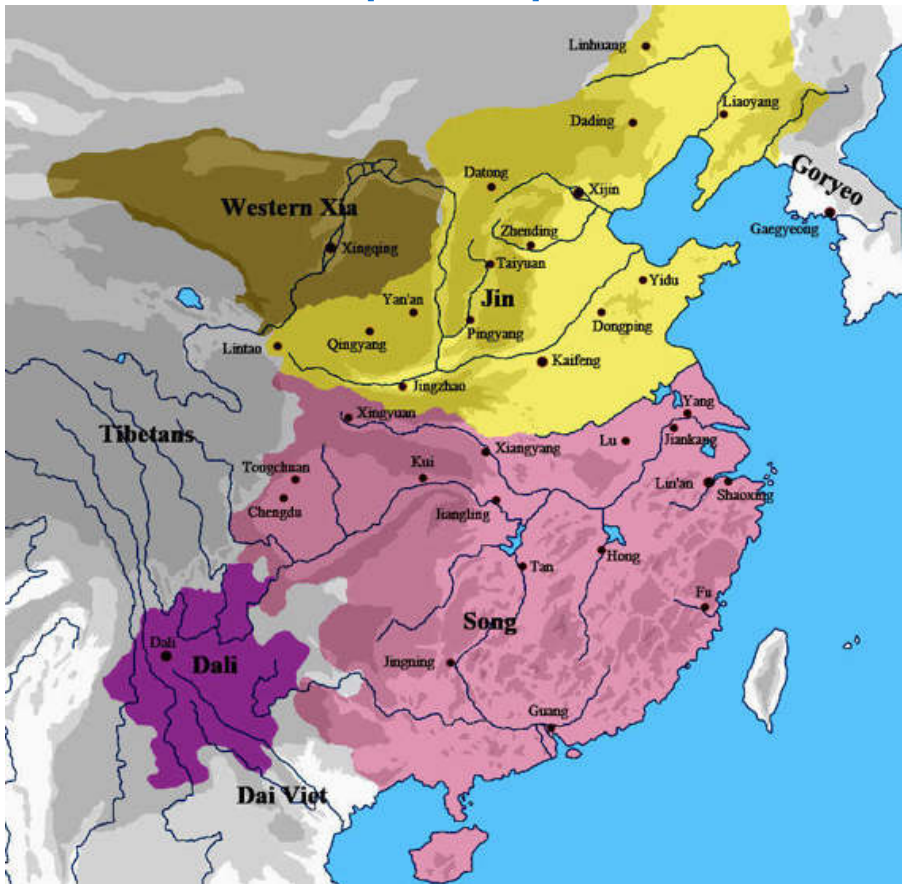
China during the Northern Song Dynasty

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China during the Southern Song Dynasty

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Boundary of the 13th Century Mongol Empire and the Places Mongol People Live Today

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Route of the 7th expedition of Zheng He's fleet (1431-1433).

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About the Author



Dr. Priscilla Ching-Chung was born in Hong Kong and completed high school at Sacred Heart School. She emigrated to the U.S. and earned her Ph.D. in History from the University of Pennsylvania, where she also taught seminars on Asian women to Freshmen. After graduation she was appointed as an Assistant Professor in Asian Studies at the City College of New York, CUNY. When she moved to Honolulu, she was first appointed as a Visiting Scholar in History at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and then served as the Special Assistant to the President for International and Public Affairs.

In 1984, Dr. Chung was offered a position with Wang Computer China Ltd., the China Trade arm of the American computer manufacturer. This took her to Beijing as Wang's marketing manager. This was a start of a five-year career in the private sector, culminating with her service as the Assistant General Manager of Wang's joint venture factory in Shanghai.

She returned to the academic environment in 1989, when she was appointed the founding Director of Public Affairs of the then brand new Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, which began accepting students in 1991. In 1998, she was recruited by the Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission, where she served as

Director of Gender overseeing the implementation of laws against discrimination.

After retiring from full-time employment, Dr. Chung returned to teaching on a part-time basis, initially as an adjunct faculty member at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and later she was also a lecturer at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, teaching at both institutions. She continues to hold an appointment as an Adjunct Associate Professor at CUHK. At both universities, she developed and offered courses on women in Chinese history and on the “alien” dynasties ruled by non-Han Chinese. Much of the material she developed for these courses has been incorporated into *Women and Power in Imperial China*. For many years, she has also contributed to the encyclopedic *Dictionary of Chinese Women*, authoring a large number of biographies and translating and editing many others.

Priscilla Ching-Chung now lives in Honolulu, with her husband Peter and their pampered Maltese dog, Lulu. Her son Christopher, also a Honolulu resident, is a regular visitor. Her younger son, Anthony, lives in Thailand but visits regularly. In addition to authoring a book that covers more than 2,000 years of history she has kept busy with things she was not able to do before in her working life, such as exercise classes, Ikebana, Hula, reading for pleasure, and doing Sudoku puzzles.